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Understanding Religion

Selected Essays

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Introduction

As the reader will discover, the essays that follow cover a range of topics associated with secular, academic efforts to understand religion. They do not, however, systematically map the great diversity of subject matters in what Edward Burnett Tylor terms “Religion in all its bearings” (Tylor 1958 II: 445, 1871). That is not because I deem it unnecessary to examine religion as broadly (as well as deeply) as possible. Rather, it is because religion is so complex that no one student is likely to be able to describe and discuss it “in all its bearings.” If, however, we are to expand our understandings as best we may, we ought to keep it in mind that religion is more than beliefs of a certain kind and rituals of a certain kind.

Religion amounts to, among other things, a variable congeries of social phenomena within and sometimes between human societies. Indeed, as the anthropologist Robin Horton (1960: 24) states in his definitional efforts, religion constitutes “an extension of the field of people’s social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society.” And, to be sure, it variably expresses and otherwise relates to a complexity of values that define important psychological and cultural dimensions in human life. Lest we forget, moreover, it is worth affirming that the intensity of commitment to religious ideas may vary from person to person, in small-scale societies as well as in our own, just as punctiliousness in the exercise of rites may vary not only from individual to individual but perhaps over individual lifetimes as well. In short, there is not only a fair amount of heterogeneity in what we identify as religions, but also among religion-bearers.

The essays in this collection touch on some of the heterogeneity. But they also point to some recurring features of religion and religion-bearers throughout the world. Simultaneous posits of differences and natural resemblances suggest some of the analytical and theoretical tensions of “modernism.” That is, they suggest recognition of seemingly opposable or perhaps even “contradictory” intellectual biases: a preference for the general and an acknowledgement of the particular, a celebration of the different and the hope of discovering what is common, and a longing for the enduring while accommodating to the transient.

Although I identify myself as a modernist (the essays gathered here testify in support of that self-identification), I also find much of worth in certain postmodernist perspectives. Most especially, I am impressed by postmodernist caveats concerning the implications that a respect for differences may have for the desire to develop stable classifications. If we truly value differences, some postmodernists ask, does that not negatively impact the notion that we can systematically attend to the world through the mediation of stable categories? Awareness of this issue affects my efforts to deal with the problem of conceptualizing religion as well as some other matters in the study of religions.

Each of the essays is preceded by a brief abstract that indicates part of what is covered in the selection that follows. The reader should be warned that I tend to wander in my writings, so that the abstracts do not disclose the full contents of the essays.

I have sorted the essays into four broad topical divisions or “Parts.” The topic headings relate to sets of interests addressed by the essays. I turn now to a discussion of each of the divisions and their contents.

Part I Orientations

This section contains two essays: the present “Introduction,” written specifically for the collection, and “The Ethnographer as Pontifex.” While it would be redundant to introduce the Introduction that you are now reading, some remarks about the orienting functions of the “Pontifex” essay are in order here.

Ethnographic monographs continue to be the traditional professional publications of socio-cultural anthropologists. In most anthropology departments throughout the world, graduate students are usually expected to engage in ethnographic research as part of their training. Indeed, ethnographic fieldwork of some duration and substance – and the writing up of what one learned in the field – often amount to something of a *rite de passage* that marks the transition from being a matriculated student to being a professional anthropologist.

I expand on discussions of ethnography in the anthropological literature by suggesting a sacerdotal analog. Just as some religious communities may suppose that their priests or shamans connect the realms of the divine and the human, so, too, do anthropologists hope that ethnographers will connect us to the culturally other. Ideally at least, ethnographic monographs are ethnographic bridges. We traverse them in hope of

new understandings, new understandings of human cultural diversity – including, perhaps, new understandings of ourselves as we may relate to, while simultaneously differing from, the culturally other. In that idealized sense, then, the ethnographer is a “*pontifex*,” a Latin term that literally means “bridge-builder.” Understanding, to be sure, is never complete nor, if we think about it critically, completely secure. But even partial and provisional understandings can be gratifying.

I chose this essay for purposes of general orientation because it touches on some of the difficulties – and some of the rewards – of trying to understand and convey the religious concepts of others.

Part II Homage to Three Pioneers

Of the various pioneers whose works prefigure contemporary efforts to understand religion, I discuss three in this division: Edward Burnett Tylor, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and A. Irving Hallowell. I will comment on each. Before doing so, however, there is a general point that I would like to make.

It seems to me that some of my contemporaries are impatient when they encounter references to various nineteenth and early twentieth century students of religion. To be sure, significant changes have occurred over the years in philosophy, in the philosophy of science, and in the impacts made on our thinking by advances in linguistics (which many now think of as a cognitive science), cognitive, developmental, and evolutionary psychologies, evolutionary biology, the neural sciences, and, indeed, the social contexts or ambiances in which scholarship has come to be situated. We can now do better in explaining religion than scholars of yesteryear, some of our contemporaries say, so why should we spend time and energy in harkening to voices from the past? There is, I think, a credible, general answer to that question: that understanding where we come from and how we got here provides a sobering historical dimension to our appreciation of our current worldview and our awareness of the provisional nature of all claims to knowledge.

The best of yesteryears’ scholars were serious and intelligent persons who cultivated imaginative (if not ultimately sustainable) ideas. Their work was the best available in their time periods, relative to the intellectual ambiances in which they operated and from which they derived their sense of problems. They not only lacked the rich data that more

recent archeology, more recent historical studies, and more recent ethnography make available to us, but they also lacked recourse to the understandings – and, indeed, stimulations – afforded us by recent advances in the contemporary cognitive, neural, and evolutionary sciences. In rejecting or setting aside various of the constructs and theories of our predecessors, we ought not to disdain their authors. Those authors often displayed personal courage and integrity in the face of prejudices and antagonisms current in their societies, and they deserve our admiration for doing so. Further, they sometimes evinced a shrewd sense of problem, and they addressed questions that we more or less continue to address. Despite our overall criticisms of their work, moreover, we can still find in their writings insightful observations, pleasing and revealing turns of phrases, and visions of new directions that are exciting and worth cherishing. Finally, we ought to note that some of our predecessors developed critical and self-critical sensitivities, sensitivities that we would be fortunate to emulate.

E. B. Tylor. Tylor's most famous publication, the two volume *Primitive Culture* (1871), was of major importance in establishing cultural anthropology as a discipline in modern secular universities and in rendering the word "culture" the key vocabulary term of that discipline. Concepts of culture eventually diffused out well beyond anthropology, and they are still widely employed for conceptually organizing and discussing many aspects of human life. Many persons, anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike, moreover, deem religion a sort of department or constituent of culture, thanks in no small measure to the influence, whether recognized or not, of Edward Burnett Tylor.

In his 1871 work, Tylor outlines for us what he regards as the evolution of religion. And, as some commentators note, in describing the evolution of religion, Tylor in effect describes what he takes to be the evolution of mind. His evolutionary efforts, however, are not without their critics. Much of what he wrote is highly speculative, the product of imaginative armchair theorizing, his data base being a jumble of descriptions of the beliefs and practices of different peoples compiled from a diversity of sources. A Just-So story, Evans-Pritchard and some other critics opine. Further, Tylor's style of evolutionary conjectures are vulnerable to the same analytical criticisms that are leveled at the similar evolutionary conjectures of other nineteenth century cultural and social theorists.

Various late nineteenth century theorists suppose that cultural and social evolution is unilineal. That is, it proceeds progressively, from lower stages to higher stages, in much the same lineal fashion, wherever it takes place. (Major posited stages, in some schemas, are “lower, middle, and upper savagery,” “lower, middle, and upper barbarism,” and “civilization.”) Facile assumptions are made to the effect that similar consequences (similar evolutionary stages found in different loci) are the products of similar causes (universal laws of the mind operating in distinct historical contexts). Not every society, it is allowed, actually passes through each stage. Some social orders, it is claimed, become arrested at one stage or another and do not progress further. The peoples of such arrested social orders are viewed, in effect, as our “contemporary ancestors.” They are held to represent, in our own time, what our ancestors were once like, before our ancestral lines evolved further. Ethnographic studies of such peoples, it is suggested, are therefore all the more valuable because they can reveal to us our own past. By comparing the different societies and cultures of the world, it is maintained, we can trace the evolutionary history of humankind (and better appreciate the civilization that we enjoy). This, basically, is what the nineteenth century “Comparative Method” was all about.

Critics soon pointed out that diffusion – the spread of culture traits or complexes from their places of origin or invention to other places, where they are often adopted by local peoples – is likely to short-circuit the identification and alleged integrity of unilineal evolutionary “stages.” A more thoroughgoing attack on the evolutionist’s position, however, was penned by the anthropologist Franz Boas. In an 1896 paper (“The Limitations of the Comparative Method in Anthropology”), Boas played an important role in turning many anthropologists away from the kinds of evolutionary studies favored by Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, and their ilk. And, perhaps through the operation of a psychological mechanism known to us as “stimulus generalization,” Boas turned numbers away from other sorts of imaginable inquiries respecting cultural evolution as well.

Boas maintained that the work of his evolutionist contemporaries rested on logical and methodological flaws. Thus, for instance, Boas argued against the evolutionists’ supposition

that if an ethnological phenomenon has developed independently in a number of places its development has been the same everywhere; or, expressed in a different form, that the same ethnological phenomena are always due to the same causes. This leads to the still wider generalization

that the sameness of ethnological phenomena found in diverse regions is proof that the human mind obeys the same laws everywhere. It is obvious that if different historical developments could lead to the same results, that then this generalization would not be tenable. Their existence would present to us an entirely different problem, namely, how it is that the developments of culture so often lead to the same results. It must, therefore, be clearly understood that anthropological research which compares similar cultural phenomena from various parts of the world, in order to discover the uniform history of their development, makes the assumption that the same ethnological phenomenon has everywhere developed in the same manner. Here lies the flaw in the argument of the [19th century evolutionist] method, for no such proof can be given. Even the most cursory review shows that the same phenomena may develop in a multitude of ways. (Boas 1940 [1896]: 273)

After giving several ethnological examples of how different causes can sometimes eventuate in similar effects, Boas goes on to write that

We have another method, which in many respects is much safer [than the comparative method of the evolutionists]. A detailed study of customs in their relation to the total culture of the tribe practicing them, in connection with an investigation of their geographical distribution among neighboring tribes, affords us almost always a means of determining with considerable accuracy the historical causes that led to the formation of the customs in question and to the psychological processes that were at work in their development. The results of inquiries conducted by this method may be three-fold. They may reveal the environmental conditions which have created or modified cultural elements; they may clear up psychological factors which are at work in shaping the culture; or they may bring before our eyes the effects that historical connections have had upon the growth of the culture.

We have in this method a means of reconstructing the history of the growth of ideas with much greater accuracy than the generalizations of the comparative method will permit. (Boas 1940 [1896]: 276)

So great was the influence of Boas's critique that many anthropologists eschewed evolutionary studies during most of the twentieth century. Not all did, of course. Thus, for instance, Julian Steward conceived of multi-evolutionary lines, and Leslie White suggested that we can study socio-cultural evolution in terms of an increasing harnessing and control of energy. Numbers of anthropologists, nevertheless, frowned on studies of social and cultural evolution.

Many twentieth century anthropologists not only rejected the evolutionary conjectures of nineteenth century authors, but they roundly distanced themselves from much else that those authors advocated. In Tylor's case, this amounted to an example of throwing out the baby

with the bath-water. Tylor not only suggested an evolution of religion and mind, but he accompanied his suggestion with a radical proposal for the reform of our civilization. Ironically enough, some anthropologists ignored the radicalism of his reformist agenda (the baby) because they did not want to sully their hands in the evolutionary context of his proposal (the bath water).

Tylor holds that when cultures evolve, some elements from older forms of culture may survive into the new. These “survivals,” as he terms them, had usually played significant – and in that sense appropriate – roles in the stages of culture in which they originated. But as survivals into new (newly evolved) cultural orders, they may be out of harmony with the new. Indeed, Tylor suggested, they are likely to prove to be stultifying relics, inhibiting further cultural progress. It is the task of the anthropologist, Tylor proclaims, to identify such elements, and by so identifying them help to eradicate them.

The last chapter of the first volume of *Primitive Culture*, and the entire second volume, are dedicated to Tylor’s theory of religion. Not to “Religion in all its bearings,” but mainly to the “intellectual” aspects of religion. Religion, indeed, is portrayed by Tylor as the first great theory in human history, a theory that seeks to answer questions about dreams, death, visions and the like by drawing on human sensory experiences. The “great doctrine of Animism,” as Tylor conceives it, has lingered on, from the dawn of human history to the religions of today, Christianity included. A close reading of Tylor suggests that while he has a certain appreciation of Animism, which he regards as the product of rational but mistaken thought, he nevertheless deems its expression in the religions of our “civilization” to be another survival (or collection of survivals), ready to be exposed as such by the anthropologist, as a beneficial service to humankind (at least in Euro-American societies).

In recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of atheistic advocacies contained in several well publicized books. Some of these are more than tinged by polemical pigments. That is especially the case, I think, for Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006). Dawkins, indeed, seems to justify the sobriquet awarded him by *Discover* magazine, that of being “Darwin’s Rottweiler.” But, as the cognitive science of religion shows us, theism is better explained by avoiding pejoratives and insults. And Darwin, in my opinion, is not in need of Rottweilers.

One of the notable things about the recent spate of atheistic publications is that they are published, easily purchased, and widely reviewed despite the severity of some of their assertions. Their authors, insofar as I

am aware, are not publicly shunned or barred from appearing on television, at least in Euro-American societies. I think that that is all to the good. Tylor, however, operated in a less accepting social order. That, in all probability, had something to do with the way he argued. Without necessarily endorsing Tylor's theory, his conclusions, or his reformer's zeal, we can nevertheless admire his courage in advancing them. And we can respect the subtlety of their packaging.

Overall, I think that Tylor is mistaken on a number of issues. He is mistaken not only for the reasons given by Boas in 1896, but for others as well. Most importantly, I think, he not only misunderstands evolution as it may apply to culture, but his views of religion and mind are narrow, and they are constructed on an unsubstantial foundation, at least when compared to the understandings now afforded us by the contemporary cognitive science of religion. We now have good reasons to suppose that theism is "natural" in humankind, and that it is atheism that is somewhat anomalous and very much in need of explanation (Atran 2002; Barrett 2004; Boyer 1994; Saler and Ziegler 2006). Tylor, nevertheless, is an important pioneer, one who blazed new paths. Ironically, some contemporary anthropologists, who declare themselves to be dedicated to the improvement of humankind, fail to appreciate the pioneering efforts in that regard of their nineteenth century predecessor and benefactor, Edward Burnett Tylor.

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. It is common, among both anthropologists and scholars in departments of religious studies, to assert that all human societies "have" religion. Or, to invoke the more qualified formulation given by Durkheim, one might say that religion is found in all societies now known, thus leaving open the possibility that some human societies of yesteryear lacked religion – but, if so, they did not survive as challenges to universalist claims about the distribution of religion. Insofar as I am aware, the only major "classical" scholar to enter a counter-claim is the French philosopher, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. In the concluding chapter of his first book on "primitive mentality," a work published in 1910, he suggests that among such living peoples as the Arunta and Bororo we do not really find what we typically take to be religion. Religion, he muses, is a differentiated product, emerging from a prior form of thought, a form of thought evinced by the Arunta and Bororo.

Lévy-Bruhl championed the idea of "mentalities." This, broadly characterized, is the notion that distinctive forms or modes of thought, different mentalities, are evinced by the members of different human so-

cial collectivities. That was hardly a new idea in Lévy-Bruhl's time, nor is it one that has now been finally discredited. In crude form it is found in sweeping stereotypes of national characters and ethnic groups. But as developed by Lévy-Bruhl, and by members of the French school of *mentalité* historians who came after him, the basic idea was refined and rendered more sophisticated (if still unpalatable to some critics).

By tracing some of the complexities and subtleties of Lévy-Bruhl's developing thoughts on the matter of "mentalities," we afford ourselves a window on the development of an interesting modernist construct. While the essay included here attempts to do that, it also calls attention to the importance of some related matters. Thus, for instance, it deals to some extent with the issue of affectivity in thought. As Lévy-Bruhl notes, his European contemporaries tend to separate out cognition from affect and motor action. But such categorical compartmentalizing, he suggests, can mislead us when we deal with "primitive thought," which allows so great a penetration of the affective into the cognitive that many of the thoughts of so-called primitive peoples are more "felt" than "thought."

When anthropological fieldworkers criticized Lévy-Bruhl for what they regarded as an unbalanced view of how the peoples that they studied think, he responded to their criticisms generously. He allowed that his early writings distorted both "primitive" thought and our thought. That is, "primitives" are more commonsensical than he had previously maintained, and our thought includes more of the "mystical" and the affective than was provided for in his earlier comparisons. Further, and quite importantly, from his fourth book on, through the sixth and last book and the posthumously published *Notebooks*, Lévy-Bruhl reproblematicized the comparison of mentalities. He held that the difference is not really based on a difference *in logic*, as he had previously supposed, but as pivoting on substantive differences in relative degree, where the "primitives" are considerably more accepting of physical incompatibilities than we, and where they are more given to a working marriage of the cognitive and the affective than we.

These issues, and some end note information on the views of certain others pertaining to the "modes of thought" question, are discussed in the essay. Over and beyond those discussions, however, is the matter of reflexivity, the matter of self-criticism. From 1910 to his death in 1939, Lévy-Bruhl continually subjected his own thoughts on the "primitive mentality" question to his own critical review. He is, indeed, a paragon of self-criticism. Like Tylor, Lévy-Bruhl depended on the published re-

ports of ethnographers, missionaries, explorers, colonial officials, and others for his data on “primitive” peoples. (While Tylor spent some time in Mexico, he was not really a fieldworker, and Lévy-Bruhl was even less of one.) When, however, such accomplished field ethnographers as Bronislaw Malinowski and E. E. Evans-Pritchard criticized him, Lévy-Bruhl was quick to take their strictures seriously and to modify his views when he found their criticisms convincing. In his openness to external criticism, as well as in his disciplined and internally generated self-criticism, he constitutes a predecessor worthy of our admiration and emulation, regardless of any skepticism that we may harbor regarding the particulars of his theories.

A. Irving Hallowell. Unlike both Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl, Hallowell was a fieldworker. His ethnographic writings on the Northern Ojibwa are landmarks, both in their clarity and because they go beyond ethnographic reportage by stimulating our wider analytical and theoretical interests. One of the hallmarks of Hallowell’s work is his carefully worked-out effort to convey in English his understandings of Ojibwa categories with minimal distortion of Ojibwa cultural subjectivities.

An example of Hallowell’s scrupulousness in that regard can be found in what he says about our word “supernatural.” That term is widely encountered in religious studies. But Hallowell avoided it in his ethnographic writings, and he explicitly calls out attention to that avoidance. Thus, for instance, he remarks that to apply the expression “supernatural persons” to characters in Northern Ojibwa myths “is completely misleading, if for no other reason than the fact that the concept of ‘supernatural’ presupposes a concept of the ‘natural’. The latter is not present in Ojibwa thought” (Hallowell 1960: 28).

Accepting a notion of the “natural” that more or less resembles Durkheim’s (1965 [1912]: 41–43) emphasis on *impersonal* natural laws and “the immutability and the inflexibility of the order of things,” Hallowell finds no real analog of that understanding in Ojibwa thought. Rather, for the Ojibwa, as Hallowell describes them, the events of the world are subject to the operation of will, purpose, and intelligence. The Ojibwa universe is populated by a large diversity of sentient objects. (By “object,” here and elsewhere in this volume, I mean two things: in logic, any member of a class, and in psychology, anything of which we take cognizance.) These different objects – human beings, thunderbirds, anthropomorphic healers without noses who live in rocks, a giant turtle, etc. – are all named. As far as I can tell from my reading of Hallowell,

the Ojibwa do not lump the many non-human objects that they conceptualize into a named macro-class. But Hallowell does. He calls them “other-than-human persons.” Why he terms them “persons” is touched on in the essay on Hallowell. Here, however, I focus attention on the “other-than-human” designation.

Hallowell deems “other-than-human” more neutral, and thus less distorting, than the term “supernatural.” He regards the latter as “a reflection of *our* cultural subjectivity” (Hallowell 1960: 21, emphasis in original). And he gives it as his opinion that “It is unfortunate that the natural-supernatural dichotomy has been so persistently invoked by many anthropologists in describing the outlook of peoples in cultures other than our own” (Hallowell 1960: 28).

Some anthropologists have been convinced by either Durkheim’s or Hallowell’s argument, and they avoid using the term supernatural in ethnographies where the people described appear to lack a natural-supernatural distinction (e. g., Godfrey Lienhardt 1961: 28). Others, however, opine that the term can be extended analogously to objects in non-Western worldviews that would be termed supernatural by us, and that doing so is convenient (e. g., Marvin Harris 1975: 514). Hardly anyone in either camp, however, describes in more than a sentence or two (if that) what “supernatural” may mean as a Western category. The Swedish anthropologist Åke Hultkrantz (1983) is a notable exception, and his discussion of the term is well worth reading.

In 1974 I was invited to present a paper at one of two memorial sessions in honor of Hallowell to be given by some of his former students at the 1975 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. I accepted the invitation, and I announced that I would focus on Hallowell’s remarks about the supernatural as they may relate to the Western intellectual history of that term. I assumed that there was a substantial, published intellectual history to access. I soon learned, however, that my assumption was mistaken. Much of what I could find by way of intellectual history was written by Roman Catholic theologians whose theological concerns led them to address issues that, at that time, I had difficulty in understanding. While the publications of Henri de Lubac (1934, 1946) and certain others were valuable as, in part, intellectual histories, a number of other works were of lesser relevance to my project. In any case, I presented a paper as scheduled, and a revised version, “Supernatural as a Western Category,” was published (Saler 1977), its flaws notwithstanding. I have remained interested in

the topic, however, and I have worked on it over the years as a “back burner” project.

In my 1977 paper, I more or less endorsed Hallowell’s views. I did so, however, while recognizing that many persons find use of the term “supernatural” to be convenient in lectures and publications. To justify repudiating it, as Durkheim, Hallowell, and others realized, requires an outlay of words. As it happens, I eventually bowed to the convenience argument, and for many years used the term myself (though sometimes putting it in quotation marks, in deference to my own unease).

Recently, however, I have thought of a possible way out of my difficulty. A similar idea independently occurred to the Finnish scholar, Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2001). We both think that Pascal Boyer’s (1994) distinctions between “intuitive” and “counter-intuitive” ideas may go a long way toward resolving debate over the applicability of the natural-supernatural distinction. While it is probable that not all peoples consciously make a distinction between the intuitive and the counter-intuitive, I agree with Boyer that such a distinction is, in effect, universally operative in human thought. In light of that understanding, a reasonable argument could be made for replacing “natural” with “intuitive” and for replacing “supernatural” (as well as “unnatural”) with “counter-intuitive” in scholarly accounts of non-Western worldviews. While this may at first seem inelegant, it would prove to be somewhat analogous to Hallowell’s use of the expression “other-than-human persons” in preference to “supernatural persons.” That is, it would be less distorting of the cultural subjectivities of some of the peoples about whom we write.

Part III Beliefs

I suspect that discussions of “beliefs” constitute the largest subject matter in publications authored by academic students of religion. Such discussions, moreover, are quite varied in what they cover. There are, for instance, numerous expositions and historical treatments of the creedal or doctrinal orthodoxies and heterodoxies of religions and religion-bearers (the beliefs of the latter may differ in interesting ways from beliefs associated with the former, even to the point of being undoctinal or credally unstable); beliefs as they may relate to rituals and organizational structures; studies of the substitution of beliefs (or the acquisition of new beliefs) in cases of religious conversion; beliefs of a “secular” or

“scientific” sort as they may resemble or differ from religious beliefs; and on and on. It is my impression, however, that fundamental considerations of what we may be talking about when we talk about beliefs are not as frequently encountered, or as frequently referenced, in anthropological and religious studies literatures. What, indeed, does it mean – or may it mean – to say that anybody believes anything? And, if we can agree on some answer to that question, how do we know that somebody believes something? While some scholars have dealt with these questions, numbers of others appear not to have read what they wrote.

The first essay in this section, “On What We May Believe about Beliefs,” considers some fundamental questions. Inasmuch as the topic posed by such questions is of great complexity, the discussion provided is inevitably partial and incomplete. Other essays in Part III enlarge the coverage of belief (without, of course, exhausting what might be profitably explored). Thus, for instance, “Finding Wayú Religion” asks if beliefs always constitute systems. Many anthropologists proceed as if they do, even to the extent of envisioning overarching systematicity in religious beliefs and worldviews.

Now, as I suggest in “Finding Wayú Religion,” it seems reasonable to expect to encounter subsystems of beliefs. Domain specific beliefs often amount to what the philosopher Stephen Stich (1996) calls “doxastic neighborhoods.” Such “neighborhoods” are clusters of beliefs that relate to one another syntactically. Tuned to specific areas of interest, they tend both to support and to constrain each other. But what about much larger “systems”?

It is one of the aims of theologians in Western societies to construct large, inclusive, and internally coherent doctrinal systems. They may begin, for instance, by subjecting fragments of scripture to analysis, and, through the exercise of reason, sometimes stimulated by what other theologians have written, to arrive at fresh understandings. Interestingly enough, in their studies of “belief systems” numbers of anthropologists and other academics who study religions make parallel (if more circumscribed) efforts.

Underlying secular academic efforts to describe (and perhaps to some extent to construct) belief systems are various suppositions – themselves beliefs – that may not be consciously considered or, at any rate, explicitly expressed. Thus, for instance, many academics believe that the world is orderly, and that the sciences and social sciences must seek to reveal (and perhaps explain) that order. Since beliefs are part of the world, they, too, will demonstrate order if one looks closely

and reasons well. Some academics, moreover, give a specific twist to that idea. Impressed by the achievements of linguists, some attempt to import linguistic models and analytical procedures into the study of various cultural domains (e.g., the much misunderstood “emic”/“etic” distinction introduced by the linguist Kenneth Pike).

I cannot attempt a responsible review here of that subject. It must suffice for me to register my own belief: that when it comes to the study of religious beliefs, linguistic models and methods are best employed in mapping and analyzing “doxastic neighborhoods.” Beliefs with a mutuality in focus are likely to be more reliably accessed by certain eliciting procedures than a disparate range of beliefs. Further, the models that we may eventually develop of their syntactic and semantic relationships are likely to be better supported than claims about entire “belief systems.” Indeed, I think it doubtful that most people actually entertain coherent “belief systems” of any appreciable scale. Most people are concerned with the press of daily life, and their beliefs are likely to be pointed primarily to specific problems and concerns, and only secondarily (if at all) to the achievement of some overarching coherence among the many doxastic neighborhoods that they visit and re-visit in the course of their lives.

The above discussion relates primarily to the essay “Finding Wayú Religion,” though it touches on some of the concerns of other selections in this section. I offer some comments on those other essays below.

“On What We May Believe About Beliefs.” If I were to expand this essay, I would add a section on distinctions drawn in the cognitive science of religion between “intuitive beliefs” and “reflective beliefs” (Sperber 1997) or, in an alternative phrasing, between “non-reflective beliefs” and “reflective beliefs” (Barrett 2004). Similar distinctions have been made by others, employing somewhat different vocabularies (see Pyysiäinen 2004 for a listing and discussion of some of them).

Intuitive or non-reflective beliefs are conceptualized as unconscious beliefs. Beliefs, that is, that are normally outside of the believer’s conscious awareness and that are not subject to review and reflection. They may, however, come into awareness as intuitions or when challenged, or when reflective beliefs that depend on them are challenged. Most of our daily actions accord with these beliefs, even though we are not usually conscious of them. Thus, for instance, we behave in ways that indicate that we take it for granted that rocks will fall to earth if we throw them up in the air, that we cannot walk through solid material

barriers of substantial thickness or tensile strength, that we are likely to harm ourselves if we fall from an appreciable height on to a hard surface, and so on. The “intuitive knowledge” and “intuitive expectations” of which some cognitive scientists speak rest on intuitive beliefs.

Reflective beliefs, in contrast, are conscious beliefs. We may not be consistently aware of them, but in situations of appropriate stimulation we summon them into awareness and perhaps subject them to reflection and review. The creedal statements of theologians are examples of reflective beliefs. But reflective beliefs themselves depend significantly on intuitive or non-reflective beliefs. The latter serve as default options for the former and they enhance the plausibility of reflective beliefs that harmonize with them. Indeed, the longevity or successful transmission of reflective beliefs depends in part on their harmonic interactions with our intuitions, and our intuitions represent a nascent coming into awareness of non-reflective beliefs. Further, inasmuch as people typically draw on memory in formulating novel – and therefore not entirely novel – reflective beliefs, intuitive beliefs once again suggest their importance by sculpting or coloring memory.

In light not only of the plausibility of the above distinction, but also in light of experimental evidence in favor of it, some proponents of the cognitive science of religion maintain that people often do not actually believe what they say that they believe. Indeed, much of what people “really” believe is “theologically incorrect” (Barrett 1996; Boyer 2001; Slone 2004). That is, a person’s intuitive beliefs may be at odds with certain of the theological or cultural dogmas that that person articulates by way of conscious endorsement. Evidence in support of this claim is for the most part based on experiments and the close analysis of narratives. Thus, for instance, a well schooled Christian may declare that his god is both outside of time and omnipresent. But when that same believer is asked to tell stories about god, the deity in his narratives is likely to go from place to place, one place at a time, in accordance with our intuitive beliefs about persons and our expectations about their behavior as it expresses what amounts to an intuitive physics.

The odd – and really interesting thing – about all this is that while intuitive beliefs may (as in the above example) seem to contradict or be out of joint with reflective beliefs, they also support them. Thus a god who is everywhere at once is clearly a departure from our normal expectations about the behavior of persons. Yet, at the same time, we can feel comfortable or familiar respecting god because the deity conforms in other respects to our general ideas and expectations about per-

sons. Thus, for instance, god has intelligence, will, and purpose, and on occasion is both recipient and source of messages.

Reflective beliefs, it should be noted, do not displace or erase intuitive beliefs. Both sorts co-exist. Intuitive beliefs are, as it were, available 7/24, and they are typically invoked – indeed, automatically invoked – when there is need for rapid (“online”) thinking and action. Reflective beliefs, in comparison, may be invoked in more leisurely settings where reflective thought (“offline thinking”) can be advantageous socially and in other ways.

Creedal or doctrinal religions such as mainstream Christianities supply our major examples of religions that celebrate reflective beliefs. Such religions, Pascal Boyer (2004: 224) points out, supplement (rather than displace) non-doctrinal religions. Like non-doctrinal religions, they are founded on intuitive beliefs, but they represent an “additional growth.” They are, as Boyer puts it, “a secondary, derivative development of a much more general human tendency to imagine important supernatural agents” (2004: 28). Most religion, Boyer writes, “has no doctrine, no set catalogue of beliefs that most members should adhere to, no overall and integrated statements about supernatural agents. Most religion is piecemeal, mostly implicit, often less than perfectly consistent and, most importantly, *focused on concrete circumstances*” (2004: 28, emphasis in original). And that, I believe, is something that we can and should believe!

“Finding Wayú Religion.” I have already commented on part of this essay elsewhere in the Introduction. But I will supplement my remarks with an observation. Wayú religion is a good example of a religion that is “piecemeal, mostly implicit, often less than perfectly consistent,” and “*focused on concrete circumstances.*” Concrete circumstances include the dead. The motives of the dead are thought to be transparent and limited, actually quite sensible in their own way, and it is equally sensible for the living to seek protection against the baleful attentions of the dead. Religion for the Wayú is largely a practical way of handling certain kinds of threats to wellbeing. And it provides a ritualized way of transcending (but probably not resolving) ambivalence, for at the same time that the Wayú fear their dead, they also mourn them.

“On Credulity” One sometimes hears it said that “People will believe anything.” That is too broad a statement. There are good arguments, and some evidence, for not accepting it across the board (e.g., Boyer 1994, 2001). Thus, for instance, to borrow an example from Boyer

(2001: 52), it is extremely doubtful that any normally cognizing adult would proclaim it as an article of faith that “There is only one God! He is omnipotent. But He exists only on Wednesdays.” This set of statements is likely to be adjudged false, and probably foolish. For those with a logical bent and an understanding of the meaning of “omnipotent,” there may well seem to be an incompatibility between being omnipotent and not existing most of the time. We normally take existence to be a precondition for having powers. And being omnipotent would presumably include the power to exist. More generally, moreover, it is counter-intuitive to suppose that any person – our god in this example is a “He” – comes into existence and goes out of existence and comes back into existence again on a regular basis. Persons, even as spirits and ghosts, are usually credited with a continuous existence or “lifetime,” whether it be short or long. Spirits or ghosts may hide themselves from us most of the time, but that does not make them non-existent. If they were truly non-existent, they could neither hide nor show themselves. Without further laboring the point, it deserves to be said that there are some imaginable beliefs (as in Boyer’s example) that most people are unlikely to accept or try to spread. Not everything goes! Our inference systems balk at some prospects.

Having said that, it must also be said that there are a huge number of beliefs that different people do appear to accept. While many such beliefs may be similar to others when it comes to themes and the intuitions that support them, there is still quite a lot of variety in apparent content.

Recognition of that fact inclines some people to label much of humankind as credulous, as being willing to accept beliefs too readily. People who talk that way usually mean beliefs of the sort that Dan Sperber and others call “reflective” or “non-intuitive.” But while people often do accept such belief with little in the way of what critics would deem “objective evidence,” they may nevertheless be acting in a socially responsive – and perhaps responsible – manner. Some of our beliefs derive from hearing our fellows voice them; we begin to speak as they do, without necessarily being aware of it. Others are imparted to us quite consciously and often deliberately, and we accept them on authority. Still others become established in our cognitive archives through still more complex process that relate to our mimicry of speech and our acceptance of authority. And some are acknowledged (if not truly accepted) in order to be companionable, or so as not to give the appearance of rejecting persons by rejecting their beliefs.

In addition to concerning ourselves with the semantics and syntactics of beliefs, we can also learn much from investigating their pragmatics. That in itself is a broad field of inquiry. In my essay “On What We May Believe about Beliefs,” I note that people do not just “have” beliefs. They usually deploy them in social transactions of diverse kinds. People use their beliefs for relating to others as well as in monitoring and directing the self. In my essay “On Credulity” I explore some of the social functions of beliefs. But it is only a modest effort at exploration, for the topic is as complex as it is important.

“Secondary Beliefs and the Alien Abduction Phenomenon.” Most of us who have written about Alien Abductions focus on people who claim to believe that they have been abducted. Those making such claims – some call them “experiencers” – often furnish dramatic tales, and they usually appear to be convinced of the truth of what they relate. I indicate this in my essay, but perhaps too pallidly. Numbers of experiencers tell their stories with such evident sincerity that I sometimes feel almost churlish in not believing them. A sociologist who studied the alien abduction phenomenon, and who generously supplied me with information and advice when I began my studies, was even more impressed than I by the shows of emotion and other narrative displays of his informants. He interviewed a woman who claimed to have been abducted, and he was, he told me, dazed by her story and how she presented it to him. He emerged from an interview of many hours a convert: he came to believe that people actually have been abducted by aliens. While he tries to appear “even-handed” (his words) in his scholarly publications, he personally believes that at least some abduction stories are true.

My interest in “secondary believers” – my term for people who do not claim to have been abducted, but who affirm belief in the reality of alien abductions – has perhaps spared me greater emersion in the affectively-charged worlds of “primary believers” (the abductees or experiencers). Secondary believers articulate their beliefs, but usually without emotional displays approaching the intensity demonstrated by primary believers. Secondary believers believe, but sometimes in hedged or tentative fashion, and often with overt recognition of the probable skepticism of their academic interviewer.

Now, my essay in this collection deals with persons who profess belief. There are, however, numbers of people with an interest in UFOs and abductions who are not believers so much as they are persons

who suspend disbelief at certain times and in certain places. I do not deal with them in my essay. I will, however, say a little about them here, for considering them helps us to expand our understandings of what it may mean to believe – and to not believe.

Some people who take more than a casual interest in UFOs and abductions tell their interviewers that they don't fully believe in the reality of either, but that they think that they are possible. Further, some add that it would make for a more interesting world (or universe) if there were extraterrestrials who take a genuine interest in human beings. And so, because they think that it is possible that alien spacecraft are monitoring us, and because the prospect is exciting or entertaining, they do what they can to learn more. Learning more may consist of reading about the subject and perhaps discussing it with others. Some persons, however, attend lectures, participate in organizations such as MUFON (Mutual UFO Network), interview people who claim to have seen unusual things in the sky and/or to have been abducted, compile records, and the like. Some are weekend researchers, and they often act as if they do believe, while still claiming to have "an open mind." In the course of their research they may be indistinguishable from hard-core believers, but that is because they suspend disbelief, at least for a time.

That point was driven home to me at a MUFON meeting that I attended in Connecticut some years ago. The meeting was much the same in structure as an academic conference. There were volunteered and invited papers, session chairmen who varied in how severely they enforced the time limits for papers, registration fees, badges, a printed program, and questions from the audience following paper presentations. One presenter gave a paper on "Bigfoot," one of several names applied to what is usually described as a mysterious giant primate glimpsed in northern latitudes. The presenter, who held a Master's Degree in Anthropology from a respected university, justified the inclusion of Bigfoot at a UFO meeting by claiming that those giants originated as extraterrestrials. They came to earth, he said, sixty-five million years ago, established a number of colonies, and for the last sixty-five million years have been regularly visited by spacecraft from their home planet. He then proceeded to give us some ethnographic information about Bigfoot, and he illustrated some of his points with anecdotes that I enjoyed. He told us, moreover, that his information came from interviews that he had conducted with more than one hundred Bigfoots (or, if you prefer, Bigfeet). These interviews, he added, were all conducted by mental-

telepathy. After his paper, a few people in the audience asked polite questions calling for clarification of some details, and then we went on to the next paper in the session.

Now, although I didn't conduct a survey, I suspect that most of the people in the room did not believe what they were told about Bigfoot. At least some (myself included) deemed the presentation entertaining, and entertainment sufficed. A rather different reception was accorded a plenary lecture given by a U.S. astronaut later that same day. Many in the astronaut's audience appeared to hang on to his every word as he recounted remarkable things that he had observed in space, and as he gave reasons for concluding that the U.S. federal government was engaged in a long-standing cover-up designed to restrict the knowledge that we humans are not the only intelligent species in the universe.

What I have just described is actually quite common in our society and probably in other societies as well. In watching, say, a vampire film on television, one can usually enjoy the story more if one suspends one's disbelief. To proclaim stoutly that there are no such things as vampires is unlikely to enhance the entertainment value of the film. Without further elaborating the point, suffice it to say that people often simulate belief – or, to approach it from a different angle, people often suspend disbelief – because doing so is fun. There is sometimes a playfulness in pretending to believe or in not strenuously disbelieving. And playfulness of that sort may be more widespread in human life than is commonly allowed for in scholarly tomes on “belief.”

Part IV Studying Religion: Some Conceptual Issues

This last section of the collection touches on a number of issues of varying concern to contemporary academic students of religion. But its center of gravity, so to speak, is the problem of conceptualizing and defining religion.

While I think of definitions as tools, as means to ends rather than as ends in themselves, I do not want to suggest that they are unimportant. Constructing or critically considering definitions can be valuable exercises for crystallizing our thoughts and for conveying them to others. Definitions, moreover, can serve as heuristics, as devices for pointing us in certain directions. And, of course, they are useful for explicitly and publicly marking out some area of inquiry, some field for exploration. This last point is strongly affirmed by Melford E. Spiro in a classic

paper dealing with the definition and explanation of religion. Spiro (1966: 90) maintains that while “a definition cannot take the place of inquiry, in the absence of definitions there can be no inquiry – for it is the definition, either ostensive or nominal, which designates the phenomenon to be investigated.” On the same page, moreover, he writes that when the term religion “is given no explicit ostensive definition, the observer, perforce, employs an implicit one.”

Religion is a matter that has come in for a lot of definition making, definition minimizing or avoidance, and (to a lesser extent) definition rejection.

I deal with definition rejection very briefly here. The rejecter may claim that what is usually meant by common uses of the term religion can be better described, explicated, and perhaps explained by using other terms. Thus by way of a widely known example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962) recommends that we substitute the expressions “faith” and “cumulative traditions” for “religion.” While Smith is still in the approximate area of what we conventionally call religion, although disinclined to employ the actual term religion, more extreme rejecters move further away. Timothy Fitzgerald, for instance, claims that religion “cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life” (Fitzgerald 2000: 4). We ought to desist from trying to use religion as an analytical category, Fitzgerald suggests, and go on to study power relations and values in human life. While Smith, Fitzgerald, and other rejecters provide some arguments in favor of their positions, the great majority of people associated with the academic study of religion continue to use the term religion, as do people in the larger societies that support their research. At the very least, an argument for retaining religion as a category term can pivot on the convenience of the term, in analogy to a similar argument made in favor of the term “supernatural” (see my discussion of that latter term earlier in this Introduction). I think, however, that stronger arguments can be made for retaining religion, especially if we conceptualize it and define it in an improved way – which is what I attempt to do in several of the essays in this section of the collection.

Some authors provide only minimal definitions of religion. These usually declare that religion centers on beliefs and practices that relate to posited “supernatural,” “superhuman,” or “spiritual” beings or agents. Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), for example, offers “the belief in Spiritual Beings” as his “minimum definition.” Still other authors

avoid stating a definition, apparently depending on their readers to have some understanding of what “religion” means. The strategy of either minimizing or avoiding definitions is useful to some extent. Rather than get bogged down in definitional issues, issues sometimes dismissed as pertaining more to the purview of lexicographers than that of scholars of religion (e.g., Boyer 2004: 27), authors are free to move on to matters that they may deem of greater substance or weight. I, however, prefer to confront definitional issues.

As I see it, problems of conceptualizing and defining religion are central to the academic study of religion. In my opinion, they should be faced explicitly and, if need be, addressed at some length. I opine, however, that efforts to define religion in essentialist fashion – to specify, that is, necessary features or conditions that must be met if phenomena are to be labeled properly as “religion” or “religions” – are very likely to be inadequate and, worse, misleading. Religion, in my view, cannot be clearly demarcated from all else. It is an analog phenomenon in a world that is mostly analog, and it has no clear boundaries. Assigning it sharp boundaries is likely to cut out phenomena that might otherwise be productively considered and included. Indeed, it tends to focus our attention on a small number of variables, to the detriment of a more expansive appreciation of religion. Some people attempt on occasion to transcend those limitations to some extent. Thus, for example, they may talk of “quasi-religions,” “semi-religions,” or “secular-religions,” by which they usually mean clusters of phenomena that strike them as resembling religions in interesting ways, but not sufficiently enough to be simply and accurately pronounced “religions.” Hyphenated “religions” are not usually taken to be real or “full” religions. Lexically treating them as if they have something “religion-like” about them, however, can serve as an effective rhetorical device for calling attention to something deemed worthy of emphasis in phenomena so labeled.

I think of religion and religions differently. My conceptual preferences are succinctly summarized in the last paragraph of the essay “Towards a Realistic and Relevant ‘Science of Religion’.” The approach that I favor, I write, “emphasizes central tendencies rather than essences, fuzzy peripheries rather than sharp boundaries, resemblances rather than identities, and typical features rather than distinctive ones.” I discuss these preferences in the essays referred to in this section, and it would be redundant of me to go over them here. I do, however, want to en-

large slightly on my preference for “typical features” over “distinctive features.”

The expression “distinctive features” is well known in linguistics, where it is employed in classical discussions of phonemes and certain other matters. When employed in definition making in the social sciences, a so-called distinctive feature is usually deemed to mark off the phenomenon credited with expressing it from all else. Ideally, at least, a distinctive feature indicates something unique or special about the phenomenon that “has” it. Thus, for instance, in his classic 1966 essay, Spiro maintains that “culturally postulated superhuman beings,” and their supposed powers to help or harm human beings, constitute “the core variable” necessary for any acceptable definition of religion. And religious institutions are distinguished from all other institutions, Spiro claims, only because of their references to culturally posited superhuman beings.

Rather than think of religion in terms of “distinctive features,” I prefer to think of it in terms of *typical features*. These are features that, in our conceptualizations, are deemed typical of what we mean by religion. They are typical, and therefore usually to be expected. But they are not on that count necessary, nor are they always to be encountered.

Swans are typically white. But there are some black swans. And tigers are typically striped. But there are some albino tigers that lack stripes. We have no difficulty in accepting black swans as swans and albino tigers as tigers. We accept them as, respectively, swans and tigers on other grounds. That, in my opinion, is how we may best approach religion. I flesh-out that idea in several essays in this section, but especially in “Conceptualizing Religion: The Matter of Boundaries.” I will not replicate that discussion here other than to say that it includes a consideration of the possibility that “gods” are contingent rather than necessary elements in religion. In the essay alluded to, argument centers on Theravada Buddhism. In considering the different views of Melford Spiro and the anthropologist Martin Southwold regarding the matter of theism and Theravada Buddhism, I opt for the position espoused by the philosopher W. D. Hudson. Hudson argues that while theism is among the family resemblance predicates of Buddhism, it is not found in all forms of Buddhism.

The most pointed discussions of the metaphor of family resemblances in this collection are found in two essays, “Family Resemblance and the Definition of Religion” and “Towards a Realistic and Relevant

‘Science of Religion’.” A more detailed treatment is given in my book, *Conceptualizing Religion* (Saler 2000a [1993]).

The expression “family resemblances” was not invented by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. It, and similar expressions such as “family faces,” have long been in colloquial use in various European languages to assert or to suggest resemblances in physical characteristics among persons related by consanguinity. Wittgenstein, however, made the expression into a major philosophical conceptual tool. In his famous discussion of the term game, he asks what the many types of games have in common. He cautions us not to say that they must have something in common, for otherwise they would not all be called games. Rather, he instructs us to look and see if there is anything common to all. And when we look and see, we do not find commonalities, we find “similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that” (*Philosophical Investigations* I.66). I apply this understanding to the category religion, and I recommend that we conceive of instantiations of that category as being linked by family resemblances, not by mutual expression of one or more distinctive features. This, as I try to make clear in the “Family Resemblance” essay, does not free us of problems. Analytical categories are likely to confront us with difficulties regardless of how they are organized. And family resemblance categories, I maintain, have their own special difficulties. But such difficulties are not fatal. Conceptualizing the category religion as a family resemblance category is, in my opinion, a first step well worth the effort. But I do not think that it suffices. I argue that we can best serve our definitional interests by also taking into account certain insights derived from prototype theory.

Arguments in support of an emphasis on resemblances are found in the essay “Comparison: Some Suggestions for Improving the Inevitable.” That work points to the inevitability of comparisons in monitoring the world. Making comparisons is part and parcel of many of our cognitive activities. Thus, for instance, our understandings of newly encountered events, and our predictive confidence respecting those events, often depends on the resemblances that we apperceive between such events and our established representations. We may not always be consciously aware of the making of comparisons. But when we are, and when we reflect on them, it is the relative strength (or weakness) of resemblances, not the “digital” yes or no of identities, that is usually of functional significance. In light of that understanding, a philosophical overview on resemblances may further strengthen our commitment to the idea of resemblances. In the “Comparison” essay, I supply such an

overview by drawing on the philosopher H. H. Price. Price argues in favor of what he calls “The Philosophy of Resemblances,” as opposed to “The Philosophy of Universals.” His argument, I think, lends additional support to the argument that I make for how we may best conceptualize religion.

Finally, there is the matter of religion and the evolutionary sciences. As my earlier discussions of Tylor, Hallowell, and evolution in this Introduction indicate, evolution has long been a topic of interest – and of controversy – among numbers of anthropologists and various other students of religion. Controversies today, however, are for the most part different in various ways than the controversies of yesteryear, owing in great measure to the emergence of a far more sophisticated and empirically referenced understanding of evolution. Indeed, new disciplines and sub-disciplines such as genetics and molecular biology have arisen over the last century, stimulated in part by technological breakthroughs such as the electron microscope and the electronic computer. New disciplines and sub-disciplines, along with progress in longer established fields of evolutionary research, have resulted in impressive advances in our knowledge. And, as one may expect, today’s evolutionary scientists are not in full agreement among themselves about certain important details. I will not try to expand on this observation here. Suffice it for me to point to a specific difference in opinion respecting one such matter among some contemporary students of religion.

Some contemporary scholars who view religion in evolutionary perspective deem religion to be an evolutionary adaptation. They hypothesize that affect-laden ideas, constructs, and practices of the sort that we typically associate with religion conferred advantages on the members of small groups of Pleistocene hunters and gatherers who entertained them and transmitted them to their offspring. In the view of these students of religion – we can call them “adaptationists” –, shared commitments of a supernaturalistic cast promoted social solidarity within small bands. This organizational benefit, it is supposed, constituted a competitive advantage over other small groups of Pleistocene hunters and gatherers who were less ideationally and affectively integrated, and it was therefore adaptive. A leading exponent of the adaptationist point of view is the biologist David Sloan Wilson, the author of *Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (2002).

Other contemporary students of religion who view religion in evolutionary perspective do not opine that religion originated as an adaptation. These scholars – we can call them “derivationists” or “spandrelists”

– think it likely that various of the affect-laden ideas, constructs, and practices that are central to religion developed as byproducts of the evolution of adaptive capacities and dispositions that we humans would presumably enjoy even if there were no religions. In this view, what we call religion is a “spandrel” or aggregate of “spandrels” (Scott Atran 2002 holds that there was no “it” to have evolved, for the elements that we deem central to religion did not all evolve together). The term spandrel was borrowed from architecture and first utilized in evolutionary studies by the biological scientists Stephen Jay Gould and Richard C. Lewontin. They use it to mean a non-adaptive evolutionary development, that is, an architectural byproduct of other evolutionary changes. While spandrels may sometimes take on functional utility, Gould and Lewontin caution against inferring an adaptive origin from a current utility. This accords with the point of view espoused by most “derivationists” or “spandrelists” who study religion. Thus, for instance, Pascal Boyer (2001, 2004) affirms that religion derives from, and is “parasitic” on, evolved propensities that are important in human life regardless of whether or not we have religion.

I count myself a proponent of the derivationist or spandrelist view. Not only does it nurture powerful theories that purport to explain much, but the adaptationist alternative strikes me as unconvincing. The kinds of religion available to our Pleistocene ancestors were probably only modestly “adaptive” (fitness enhancing), if even that. I see no compelling reason to imagine that those religions joined band members together in consequence of commonly endorsed creeds, or by virtue of taking directions from religious guilds, or through participation in socially inclusive rituals that served as distinctive badges of group membership. In short, I am skeptical that Pleistocene religions conferred crucial organizational or solidarity advantages on some small human groups in competition with others. I think it likely that Pleistocene religiosity was starkly anthropomorphic and animistic, to a large extent fear-triggered, intellectually shallow, and interpersonally variable as to both beliefs and rites.

My essay, “Towards a Realistic and Relevant ‘Science of Religion’,” affirms my enthusiasm for invoking the evolutionary sciences in our efforts to account for religion. In doing so, it describes and admires some of the work of the archeologist Steven Mithen. My remarks about evolution, moreover, are incorporated into a larger set of advocacies respecting an idealized science of religion. Such a science, in my opinion, would realistically takes human beings (rather than religions

and cultures) as its phenomenal subjects. Further, its theorizing would be relevant to the theorizing of other sciences, particularly the biological sciences.

The essay, "Biology and Religion: On Establishing a Problematic," makes the point that some scholars focus on religion as something to be explained or understood, whereas others discuss religion mainly in order to illustrate or illumine something else. Obviously, gravitating toward one or the other choice will have consequences. The major thrust of my essay is to evaluate critically someone else's discussion of religion, and by so doing to support a conclusion about how we may best attempt to connect cultural phenomena to their possible biological substrates. I focus on Walter Burkert's book, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religion* (1996), which is largely devoted to making religion the thing to be understood against a posited biological landscape.

Walter Burkert is one of the world's leading classicists. His *Creation of the Sacred* is in many respects in keeping with his renown as a scholar of ancient Greek religion and other forms of religion in the ancient Mediterranean basin. It is erudite, lucid, thoughtful, and insightful. For all that, however, I find it disappointing. I agree with an observation voiced by the philosopher Daniel Dennett: Burkert, Dennett (1998: 122) writes, "has whetted my appetite beyond what he can satisfy with his feast of good suggestions." While Dennett credits Burkert with being an "alert and imaginative guide" to available sources on religion developed by anthropologists and historians, Dennett holds that he is more a guide than a theorist (Dennett 1998: 127). I agree.

Burkert attempts to sketch for us some of the biological "landscape" that underlies religion. I judge the word "landscape" to be a felicitous choice. And I think the same of the expression "tracks of biology." Unfortunately, however, I opine that Burkert is not a very convincing tracker, nor does he substantively deliver on landscape. He strikes me as being vague respecting certain important points in his perspective, as neglecting or rejecting culture in cases where there are reasons to take it seriously, as hinting at homologies where he can only demonstrate analogies, and in other respects as seeming to dismiss the canons of science that I extol elsewhere (e.g., Burkert 1996: 22). But above all, I think that he fails to propose mechanisms that intervene between expressions of religiosity and posited biological substrates.

That is, Burkert suggests that various human religious behaviors relate to genes giving "recommendations" or to "more original processes in the evolution of life" (Burkert 1996: 22), without supplying a persua-

sive account of how religious behavior is linked to these presumably more fundamental factors. How do we go from one to the other? What are the likely explanatory mechanisms? Burkert does not tell us. That failure, as I indicate in my essay, is a failure to note, meet, and transcend a cautionary consideration advanced by Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and Jerome Barkow (1992: 3): “[T]o understand the relationship between biology and culture, one must first understand the architecture of our evolved psychology ... Past attempts to leapfrog the psychological – to apply evolutionary biology directly to human social life – have for this reason not always been successful.”

Having already endorsed the above statement by Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow in the *Biology and Religion* essay, I conclude this Introduction by endorsing it again. The need that it suggests for a consideration of intervening variables in the construction of explanatory mechanisms is crucial for the emergence of a realistic and relevant science of religion. And so, too, is a consideration of other fundamental epistemological issues as they relate to the study and understanding of religion. It is this latter consideration that connects my essays in this collection. I very much enjoyed writing them, and I hope that the reader will find them useful.