

After God

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INTRODUCTION

You cannot understand the world today if you do not understand religion. Never before has religion been so powerful and so dangerous. No longer confined to church, synagogue, and mosque, religion has taken to the streets by filling airways and networks with images and messages that create fatal conflicts, which threaten to rage out of control. When I began pondering these issues in the 1960s, few analysts or critics would have predicted this unexpected turn of events. The governing wisdom at that time was that modernization and secularization go hand in hand: as societies modernize, they secularize through a process that is inevitable and irreversible. I was never convinced by these arguments, for two reasons. First, all too often critics did not appreciate the intricate relation between secularity and the Western religious and theological tradition. As we will see, religion and secularity are not opposites; to the contrary, Western secularity is a *religious* phenomenon. Second, and closely related to this point, the critics who advanced the secularization theory usually had a simplistic understanding of religion, which tended to restrict its scope in a way that limited its importance. Secularists misinterpret religion as much as believers misunderstand secularism. Religion is not a separate domain but pervades all culture and has an important impact on every aspect of society.

To appreciate religion's abiding significance, it is necessary to consider not only its explicit manifestations but also its latent influence on philosophy, literature, art, architecture, politics, economics, and even science and technology. To the tutored eye, religion is often most influential where it is least obvious. Over the years, I have tracked the traces

of the elusive subject that has long obsessed me into places where it frequently remains hidden. I could not have anticipated the surprising twists and turns this journey has taken. To many friends and critics it has seemed that I stopped studying religion a long time ago. But this is not true—indeed, I have never left the study of religion behind but have always attempted to expand its scope and significance. The following pages are devoted to analyzing how we have arrived at this unanticipated juncture at the beginning of the twenty-first century and to elaborating an alternative vision better suited to addressing the urgent challenges that must be met if the future is not to turn deadly.

In the course of this endeavor, I have been consistently guided by leading eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thinkers and writers. Though it has become fashionable to deny it, the fact is that our world has been decisively shaped by these seminal figures. Moreover, these men—and they were men—were Christian and, more specifically, Protestant. Modernity as well as postmodernity is inseparably bound up with Protestantism. Needless to say, other societies and cultures have followed different courses of development; but with the rise of globalization, it is no exaggeration to say that no society or culture has been untouched by this originally Western movement. It is undeniable that, for better and for worse, the world as we know it would not have come about without Protestantism. Max Weber did not know the extent to which he was right; were he writing today, the title of his book would have to be *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Globalization*.

It is important to note, however, that there is a significant difference between Weber's analysis and the argument I develop in this book. Whereas Weber places Calvinism at the center of his analysis, I focus more on the contribution of Luther and those who work in the tradition he began. This is not, of course, to deny that there is a very close relation between Lutheranism and Calvinism or that Calvinism has played a major role in forming modern institutions and ideas. The continuing influence of Calvinism is nowhere more evident than in the United States. The history of the Protestants who came to this country from England, Scotland, and the Netherlands is already well known. But the story of Protestantism's ongoing influence is richer than this familiar narrative suggests. By returning to Luther and the revolution he launched, it is possible to detect an additional trajectory that complicates the emergence of modernity and by extension our own postmodern condition. In this complementary line of analysis, Germany plays a pivotal role. Without in any way minimizing the contributions of figures like Locke, Hume,

Smith, and Darwin, it is no less important to acknowledge the significance of Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Friedrich and Wilhelm Schlegel, and Nietzsche, all of whom were implicitly or explicitly Lutheran. Other writers who were Lutheran but not German, like Kierkegaard, or German but not Lutheran, like Marx, were nonetheless decisively influenced by the German Lutheranism that surrounded them. To reread the past three centuries through their eyes is to see our own time anew.

I do, of course, realize that the argument developed in the following pages seems to run counter to many of the critical perspectives that have been most influential for the past several decades. For intellectual as well as political reasons, so-called metanarratives have been declared a thing of the past and have been replaced with micronarratives focused on the local rather than the global. Though rarely acknowledged, the interpretive perspectives of many self-professed avant-garde critics actually reflect and reinforce many of the most conservative aspects of the contemporary research university, where hyperspecialization produces scholars whose critical vision remains limited. When microanalysis produces nothing but micronarratives, it becomes impossible to know where one is because one does not know where one has come from. The inadequate appreciation of the Western religious tradition has led to the failure to understand how critical perspectives, which have been so influential in recent decades, are thoroughly imbricated in the Jewish and Christian traditions. As critics change with the times, they, like those they attack, “get religion.” But the more they write, the more embarrassingly evident it becomes that they do not get religion at all. The problem is that neither those who defend nor those who attack religion today have an adequate understanding of it.

Any investigation of the role religion plays in society and culture today must, therefore, begin by asking a question these very critical theorists have forbidden for several decades: What is religion? In formulating my response, I draw on the insights of social and natural scientists as well as theologians, philosophers, and literary critics. By elaborating an expanded notion of religion, it becomes both possible and necessary to explore aspects of culture usually overlooked in such investigations. The definition of the origin and function of religion that I develop in the first chapter frames the substance and structure of the entire analysis that follows.

In chapters 2 and 3, I examine the role that Luther’s turn to the subject played in the emergence of modernity and postmodernity. By privatizing, deregulating, and decentering the relation between the believer and

God, Luther initiated a revolution that was not confined to religion but extended to politics and economics. The Reformation was an information and communications revolution that effectively prepared the way for the information, communications, and media revolution at the end of the twentieth century. The far-reaching implications of Luther's self-contradictory subject are not fully articulated until the end of the turn of the nineteenth century, when religion, art, and politics intersect in the vexed notions of autonomy and representation. The understanding of the autonomous subject, which is inseparable from modern democracy and markets, and the conception of self-referentiality, which is definitive of the modern work of art, emerge at the same time and derive directly from the Christian understanding of God. Changes in religion, art, and philosophy influence political, economic, and technological developments, which, in turn, condition cultural evolution. In this way, nature, society, culture, and technology are joined in mutually conditioning and reciprocally transformative feedback loops. When art displaces religion as the focus of spiritual striving, religious prophets become avant-garde artists whose mission is to realize the kingdom of God on earth by transforming the world into a work of art.

Secularity, I have suggested, is a religious phenomenon. In chapter 4, I explore the way in which secularity emerges within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Throughout the history of the West, God has repeatedly disappeared by becoming either so transcendent that he is irrelevant or so immanent that there is no difference between the sacred and the secular. During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, the immanence of idealism and romanticism displaced the transcendence of deism. Theologians, philosophers, and artists, who were among the most influential founders of modernism, understood nature and history to be the self-embodiment of God. Their belief grew out of creative reinterpretations of the classical Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. The implications of this unexpected turn do not become evident until the advent of twentieth-century death of God theology and the social and cultural changes it both reflects and indirectly promotes. This insight leads to the unexpected but nonetheless inescapable conclusion that contemporary secularity is actually implicit in classical Christology as it was defined in the great church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries.

In chapters 5 and 6, the focus shifts to developments during the last half of the twentieth century and first years of the new millennium. What the nineteenth century conceptualized the twentieth century actualized.

As transcendence gives way to immanence, the avant-garde agenda of transforming the world into a work of art is realized through new technologies that increasingly obscure the line supposedly separating image and reality. When images become real and reality appears to be nothing more than shifting images, more and more people become obsessed with finding a firm foundation they believe can provide certainty and security in a world that often seems to be drifting toward mere chaos. But the quest for self-certainty and security quickly turns destructive. In the complex systems and networks that make up today's world, uncertainty and instability can be creative. The new emerges far from equilibrium at the *edge* of chaos in a surprising moment of creative disruption that can be endlessly productive.

The religious wars threatening to rend the world in the opening decade of the twenty-first century have their roots in the culture wars whose most recent peak came during the 1960s. Here once again opposites share more than initially is evident. Hippies, radicals, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals were all searching for authentic personal experience in the name of which they could resist centralized systems and hierarchical power. By the end of the millennium these shared values had prepared the way for a political and economic agenda based on the principles of privatization, decentralization, and deregulation. The neofoundationalism of the New Religious Right underwrites the neoconservatism and neoliberalism that reign as the governing ideology today. With these developments, it becomes clear that unquestioned religiosity and moralism are actually much more dangerous than the beliefs and practices they are designed to resist. Through another unexpected reversal, ostensible opposites reveal a hidden identity. The very counterculture charged with leading society down the slippery slope of relativism and nihilism is actually a spiritual or even religious phenomenon, and the moral zealots who attack relativism in the name of absolutism are nihilists who reject the present world for the sake of a future kingdom they believe is coming.

The most pressing dangers we currently face result from the conflict of competing absolutisms that divide the world between oppositions that can never be mediated. In the final two chapters, I develop an alternative interpretive framework (or, more precisely, schema) that entails different values, ones that promote policies and programs better adapted to the complexities of contemporary life. In a world where to be is to be connected, absolutism must give way to relationalism, in which everything is codependent and coevolves. After God, the divine is not

elsewhere but is the emergent creativity that figures, disfigures, and refigures the infinite fabric of life. A religion without God issues in ethics without absolutes to promote and preserve the creative emergence of life across the globe.

As one begins to comprehend the scope of the problems we face, it is difficult not to despair—the obstacles do seem insuperable. Processes have been set in motion that cannot be reversed, and it is unclear whether people will be willing or able to make the changes required to delay, if not avoid, looming disaster. The acknowledgment of peril can, however, provoke committed struggle rather than resignation to inevitable defeat. Even if the cause is lost, its pursuit is just. To affirm possibility while confessing impossibility requires risking a faith that embraces uncertainty and insecurity as conditions of creative emergence. This absolutely paradoxical faith is the consummation of the revolution Luther began.

CHAPTER ONE

Theorizing Religion

RELIGION VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

The 1966 Easter edition of *Time* bore a black cover with the question “Is God Dead?” emblazoned in large red letters. Well versed in the history of philosophy and theology, the authors of this much-debated article explain:

Some Christians, of course, have long held that Nietzsche was not just a voice crying in the wilderness. Even before Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard warned that “the day when Christianity and the world become friends Christianity is done away with.” During World War II, the anti-Nazi Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote prophetically to a friend from his Berlin prison cell: “We are proceeding toward a time of no religion at all.”

For many, that time has arrived. Nearly one of every two men on earth lives in thrall to a brand of totalitarianism that condemns religion as the opiate of the masses—which has stirred some to heroic defense of their faith but has also driven millions from any sense of God’s existence. Millions more, in Africa, Asia and South America, seem destined to be born without any expectation of being summonsed to the knowledge of the one God.¹

Ten years later *Newsweek* declared that “the most significant—and overlooked—religious phenomenon of the 70s” was “the emergence of evangelical Christianity into a position of respect and power.”² Today Evangelicalism is alive and well in this country, and Pentecostal Protestantism is the fastest-growing religion in Africa, Asia, and South Amer-

ica. Why did this apparent reversal occur in such a short span of time? How could so many intelligent people have been so wrong about religion and the modern world?

The short answer to these complicated questions is that influential commentators, critics, and theorists simply misunderstood the relationship of religion to modernization and secularity. Religion and secularity, they assumed, are opposites and, thus, when one waxes, the other inevitably wanes. As societies modernize, the argument went, they become more secular. This process was supposed to be inevitable and irreversible. For some, secularization represented the demise of religion and, for others, its most complete realization. Few seemed to doubt that in the future religion would be less, rather than more, important in the lives of individuals and societies.

What went largely unnoticed at the time was the fact that the 1960s was not only the era of the death of God and the birth of the counterculture but also the period during which what eventually became the New Religious Right began to appear. As we will see in chapter 6, conservative Protestants and Catholics decided to set aside doctrinal differences to combat what they regarded as the pernicious effects of the social and cultural revolution that was occurring. Far from a return to premodern forms of belief and practice, the emergence of what might best be described as neofoundational religion during the latter half of the twentieth century is best understood as a distinctively postmodern phenomenon that is inseparably related to processes of globalization. Over the years, the consistent goal of the New Religious Right has been to reverse what they consider to be the religious, moral, and social decline that began in the sixties by returning to basic values and foundational beliefs. Increasingly alarmed by the growing social, political, cultural, and economic power of religion, recent critics of the New Religious Right, who call themselves secularists, maintain that the persistence of “naïve” religious belief and the political agenda it promotes is a threat not only to the nation and the international order but also to the future of civilization. As the debate becomes more heated, misunderstandings become more profound. Many of the most prominent supporters and critics of religion tend to be historically uninformed and critically ignorant. A more sophisticated understanding of the history of the interplay of religion, society, and culture in the West shows that the conflict between the faithful and the secularists is not new but can be traced back to the founding of this country. What makes so much contemporary debate pointless is that neither side realizes that secularity is a *religious* phe-

nomenon, which grows directly out of the Judeo-Christian tradition as it develops in Protestantism. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to insist that not only the modern but also the postmodern world effectively began with the Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century. This admittedly controversial claim runs counter to trajectories charted by recent critics. In the following chapters, I argue that there is an unrecognized religious dimension to globalization that does not reflect a generic spirituality but is Protestant through and through.

To begin to appreciate the complex interrelation between religion and secularity, it is necessary to develop an expanded notion of religion. Religion is not limited to what occurs in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples; rather, there is a religious dimension to all culture. Religion, moreover, is often most influential where it is least obvious. Supporters as well as critics fail to discern the pervasive influence of religion because their understanding of it is too limited. When the invisible as well as the visible aspects of religion are recognized, the simplistic opposition between secularity and religion collapses and the terms of analysis are effectively recast.

With the expanded interpretation of religion that I will develop in the following section, it becomes possible to approach the question of why there has been such a resurgence of conservative religion in recent decades. The worldwide rise of neofoundationalism is a symptom of and response to the process of globalization. While modernism is coterminous with industrialization, postmodernism is inseparable from the emergence of postindustrial network culture.³ With the development and distribution of information, telematic, and communications technologies, the infrastructure of social, economic, political, and psychological processes has been radically transformed. Once again, religion exercises a hidden influence: what began with the sixteenth-century information and communications revolution brought about by the coemergence of print and the Reformation is coming to completion in the information and network revolution of the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Deregulated, decentralized, and distributed networks effectively collapse distance and compress time to create a world in which to be is to be connected. As connectivity spreads, complexity increases and, correlatively, instability and uncertainty grow. These developments, in turn, lead to a longing for simplicity, certainty, and security. Neofoundationalism in all of its guises across the globe represents, among other things, an effort to satisfy this desire. Contemporary foundationalism takes a surprising variety of forms, ranging from the scrip-

tural literalism of Christian Evangelicals and Islamists to the genomic logocentrism and neurophysiological reductionism of some of today's most sophisticated scientists. These seemingly disparate forms of belief are alternative versions of a religiosity that privileges simplicity, security, and certainty over complexity, insecurity, and uncertainty. Such religiosity attempts to banish doubt by absolutizing relative norms and dividing the world between exclusive opposites (good/evil, sacred/profane, religion/secularity, West/East, white/black, Christianity/Islam, etc.). Its premise is that reality is solid—everything is clear, neat, pure, precise, and, thus, nothing remains subtle, ambiguous, uncertain.

Religiosity, however, is not the same as religion. When understood in all its rich complexity, religion does not simply provide secure foundations but destabilizes every type of religiosity by subverting the oppositional logic of either/or.

It is not the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade.⁴

This shade (of difference) can be thought only through an elusive neither/nor, which makes it possible to imagine religion in a way that embraces the complexity, uncertainty, and insecurity that are the marks of life in a world where the future remains open.

AGAINST THEORY

It has never been more important to study religion critically than today, but it has never been more difficult to do so. By now it should be clear that far from disappearing, the influence of religion continues to grow. It is, therefore, imperative to develop a better understanding of what religion is and how it functions. There are, however, forces beyond as well as within the university that make responsible reflection on this important problem difficult, if not impossible. As the stakes of devotion to competing religious beliefs increase, political correctness on the left becomes religious correctness on the right. The deepening entrenchment of opposing views creates a growing resistance to every form of criticism and makes constructive dialogue virtually impossible. It is precisely this resistance that underscores the urgent need for renewed critical analysis.

Given these circumstances, it is necessary to return once again to the recurrent, though recently neglected, question “What is religion?” For

the past several decades, this question has been widely regarded as illegitimate for political as well as philosophical reasons. The reluctance to engage in critical reflection on the nature of religion has led to an interpretive vacuum that has been filled by a variety of reductive analyses in which religion is understood as a mere epiphenomenon of more basic or fundamental processes. Some analysts even go so far as to insist that there is no such thing as religion. Jonathan Z. Smith has influenced many scholars with what might be described as an archaeology or genealogy of the concept "religion." "Religion," he argues, "is not a native category." Indeed, the very notion of religion, it seems, emerges as a result of nascent globalization. In the sixteenth century, Europeans exploring the so-called New World encountered a startling array of strange beliefs and practices, which they eventually described as religious. Smith explains that religion "is not a first person term of self-characterization. It is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is the other, in these instances colonialists, who are solely responsible for the content of the term. . . . Even in these early formulations, there is an implicit universality. 'Religion' is thought to be a ubiquitous human phenomenon." Smith insists that "no specific historical or cultural phenomena correspond to the general term 'religion.'"⁵

The etymology of *religion* compounds rather than clarifies the difficulties. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *religion* is "of doubtful etymology." It appears to derive from at least two Latin terms. The first and more widely acknowledged is *religare*, which means "to bind back" (*re-*, "back," plus *ligare*, "to bind"). *Leig* is also the stem of "ligament," "ligature," and "obligation." Cicero, by contrast, maintains that "religion" derives from *relegere* (to read over again), whose stem, *leg*, means "thought through again." Throughout the Western tradition, these alternative etymologies have led to contrasting interpretations of religion. The definitions of religion that eventually emerge from this divided origin appear to lend support to Smith's claim that the category is culturally biased. The first three definitions listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are remarkably limited.

1. A state of life bound by monastic vows; the condition of one who is a member of a religious order, especially in the Roman Catholic church.
2. A particular monastic or religious order or rule.
3. Action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this.

The American Heritage Dictionary only deepens the confusion by defining religion as

1. The expression of man's belief in and reverence for a superhuman power recognized as the creator and governor of the universe.
2. Any particular integrated system of this expression.
3. The spiritual or emotional attitude of one who recognizes the existence of a superhuman power or powers.

These definitions obviously exclude many beliefs and practices, ranging from Buddhism and pantheism to myriad new religions and alternative spiritualities, that many practitioners and analysts accept as religious.

During the nineteenth century, increasing travel and communications combined with the growth of scholarship to expand the knowledge of other cultures exponentially. The encounter with so many new beliefs and practices created a taxonomic imperative that required an acceptable definition of religion. Smith points out that, from the time of the early Christian apologists, "the most common form of classifying religions . . . is dualistic and can be reduced, regardless of what differentium is employed, to 'theirs' and 'ours.'"

By the time of the fourth-century Christian Latin apologists, a strong dual vocabulary was well in place and could be deployed interchangeably regardless of the individual histories of the terms: "our religion"/"their religion," with the latter often expressed through generic terms such as "heathenism," "paganism," or "idolatry"; "true religion"/"false religion"; "spiritual (or "internal") religion"/"material (or "external") religion"; "monotheism" (although this term, itself, is a relatively late construction)/"polytheism"; "religion"/"superstition"; "religion"/"magic."⁶

These normative distinctions continue to shape classificatory systems. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were only four acknowledged categories of religion: Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedism (any one of which might be regarded as true), and the rest, that is, paganism, heathenism, idolatry, and polytheism (all of which were declared false). The notion of world religions, which remains influential today, was not developed until the 1920s. It includes twelve "living traditions": Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and Primitivism.⁷ As knowledge of different traditions became broader and deeper, the challenge of finding a definition that identified similarities while preserving differ-

ences became considerably more formidable. The very proliferation of information that created the need for an accepted definition of religion made its formulation all the more difficult.

The resistance to developing a definition of religion that could be used within as well as across traditions is not, however, simply a result of the recognition of historical differences and cultural relativity but also reflects profound philosophical reservations about any such undertaking. For the past four decades, the study of religion has been caught in theoretical currents circulating throughout the arts, humanities, and social sciences. For our purposes, the two most relevant trajectories are structuralism and poststructuralism. In this context, these interpretive alternatives must be understood more broadly than is customary. While structuralists maintain that it is possible to identify common or even universal forms and patterns in different psychological, social, and cultural phenomena, poststructuralists insist that purportedly universal forms are actually artifacts designed to fulfill certain desires and advance specific ideological agendas.

When understood expansively, structuralism encompasses the version of phenomenology that has been most influential in the study of religion. No work has been more important in debates about the definition of religion than Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957). Bringing together aspects of Husserl's phenomenology with the history of religions, Eliade developed a hermeneutical position that effectively recasts Platonism as methodological idealism. That is to say, he derives a strategy for uncovering the one essential form or implicit idea of religion amid its multiple appearances. In the opening pages of the analysis, he explains: "the important thing for our purpose is to bring out the specific characteristics of *the* religious experience [emphasis added], rather than to show its numerous variations and the differences caused by history."⁸ Several points in this telling comment deserve emphasis. First, in accord with the turn to the subject that marks the beginning of modern theology in Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), Eliade privileges experience rather than thought or action in his account on religion. Second, like Schleiermacher, he is convinced that experience can be distinctively religious. Third, Eliade assumes that amid the vast variety of religions, it is possible to identify *the* religious experience. There is, in other words, one true religious experience of which all purportedly religious experiences are variations. Finally, this experience is *sui generis* and, thus, cannot be reduced to anything other than itself. Eliade defines this invariant feature of reli-

gion by reinterpreting Émile Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane through Rudolph Otto's category of "the holy." "Our primary concern," he explains, "is to present the specific dimensions of religious experience, to bring out the differences between it and profane experience of the world."⁹ In anticipation of issues to be probed in the next chapter, it is important to note that Eliade points out that Otto's notion of the holy derives from Luther's account of the "terrible power, manifested in the divine wrath."

In *Das Heilige* [which was published in English with the misleading title *The Idea of the Holy*], Otto sets himself to discover the characteristics of this frightening and irrational experience. He finds *the feeling of terror* before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*), the majesty (*majestas*) that emanates an overwhelming superiority of power. . . . Otto characterizes all these experiences as numinous (from Latin *numen*, god), for they are induced by the revelation of an aspect of divine power. The numinous presents itself as something "wholly other" (*ganz andere*), something basically and totally different.¹⁰

The further details of Eliade's analysis need not concern us in this context. The important point here is his claim that it is possible to identify the essence of religion and that this "elementary form" can be defined in terms of the binary opposition between the sacred and the profane.

At the same time that Eliade was building his hermeneutical method on Husserl's phenomenology, Claude Lévi-Strauss was appropriating Ferdinand Saussure's linguistic theory to develop his version of structuralism. Just as Husserl insisted that all phenomena—cultural and otherwise—harbor a hidden essence, so Saussure argued that all linguistic practices (*la parole*, "speech") presuppose foundational principles, rules, or structures (*la langue*, "language"). Lévi-Strauss first extends Saussure's notion of speech to include all cultural phenomena and then argues that the structures, which are the transcendental conditions of the possibility of speech, are universal. These foundational structures themselves presuppose the metastructure of binary opposition. In structural analysis, all cultural phenomena are grounded in infrastructures, which secure their determinate meaning. For those who know the code, everything is decipherable.

As phenomenology and structuralism spread during the middle decades of the last century, philosophical and political misgiving about these hermeneutical strategies gained momentum. For critics, the "es-

sentialism” of phenomenology and what came to be described as the “logocentrism” of structuralism reinscribe what Heidegger identified as the Western ontotheological tradition, which privileges the presence of identity and represses or excludes otherness and difference(s). Three influential criticisms of essentialism and logocentrism emerged: history of religions, social constructivism, and deconstruction. While there was, of course, a long tradition of the history of religions before the twentieth century, the growing sophistication of the social sciences and the increasing differentiation between theology and the practice of religion changed the interpretive landscape. In addition to this, the emergence of the academic study of religion led to the creation of subfields like the history of religions, the sociology of religion, the anthropology of religion, and the psychology of religion and opened new avenues of research that posed further additional questions. The unrelenting gaze of the social sciences threatened to dissolve their very object of investigation. If there are only different religions, which are symptomatic of unique historical and cultural contexts, then there appears to be no such thing as religion as such. This line of analysis implies a methodological nominalism in which the term *religion* can refer only to a specific set of beliefs and practices. In the absence of a general concept of religion, however, problems of definition are insurmountable and comparative analysis is impossible. While knowledge does not necessarily require universality, it does presuppose that a certain level of ascertainable generality characterizes patterns constitutive of phenomena in the real world. As we will see below, it is possible to understand these formative patterns as neither essentialist nor logocentric.

In addition to these epistemological difficulties, the interpretive dilemma is further compounded by what Paul Ricoeur labeled “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” From this point of view, different religions are not, as Eliade insists, *sui generis* but are actually effects of supposedly more basic social, economic, political, and psychological processes. Since religious beliefs and practices are epiphenomenal, they must be understood by reducing them to something other than themselves. Though rarely acknowledged by professional students of religion, these methodological approaches call into question the study of religion as such and undercut the rationale for independent departments and programs in religious studies. If there is no such thing as religion, then why do we need departments to study it?

The emergence of social constructivism during the past several decades has politicized this debate. For many concerned people beyond

ivied walls, these heated debates often are not only baffling but also deeply disturbing. If one is patient enough to listen, however, it gradually becomes clear that, far from merely academic, these controversies reflect pressing conflicts resulting from uncertainties and instabilities created by globalization. As students and faculty members have become more diverse, long-accepted traditions and categories of classification and interpretation have been subjected to thoroughgoing criticism. For many, foundational essences and structures are not merely theological vestiges that represent philosophical mistakes but social constructs devised to serve political ends. Cultural artifacts, critics argue, are recast as natural phenomena to reinforce dominant power structures. This line of argument represents a noteworthy reversal of some of the most important ideas that lie at the heart of modernity and its institutions. During the Enlightenment, the notion of human nature and, correlatively, natural rights formed the foundation of both the American and the French Revolutions. Over two centuries later, human nature has become for many a reactionary, rather than a revolutionary, principle. If human nature is real, the argument goes, natural determination is inevitable and radical change is impossible. For social constructivists, what others claim to be natural is actually cultural. Naturalism and essentialism, they argue, create cultural hegemony, which reinforces political hegemony by creating ideological justifications to support those in power. Rephrasing Marx's opening comments in his well-known response to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, social constructivists argue that the criticism of naturalism and essentialism is the premise of all criticism. By exposing ideological superstructures as epiphenomenal, critics claim to clear the way for thoroughgoing social, political, and economic transformation.

While sensitive to the political significance of different interpretive strategies, deconstruction is more concerned with how implicit theological and philosophical assumptions continue to shape the Western cultural tradition. As we will see in detail below, the gods or their functional equivalents do not simply disappear but go underground, where they continue to support human life. This transformation of religious dogma leads to unrecognized theological and philosophical assumptions that inform many of the most sophisticated theories in the natural and social sciences. For poststructuralists, the task of criticism at the end of modernity is (paraphrasing Heidegger's interrogation of thinking at the end of philosophy) to expose the instability of all foundational structures and incompleteness of all purportedly comprehensive systems.

In this way, deconstruction effectively calls into question every system constructed to provide security, certainty, and stability.¹¹ With the rise of religious and political absolutisms, this critical gesture has never been more important than it is today. But deconstructive criticism is not enough—it is also necessary to articulate alternative structures that can inform creative cultural production and effective sociopolitical transformation.

The resistance to any theory designed to answer the question “What is religion?” has led to unexpected results. Critics who insist that it is impossible as well as illegitimate to ask questions about the origin, nature, and function of cultural phenomena create an opening for more extreme forms of reductive analysis. The remarkable advances in the biological and neurological sciences in recent years have led to different forms of biologism, according to which mental, social, and cultural processes can be reduced to natural laws and genetic determinants. The three most important versions of biologism are sociobiology, genetic logocentrism, and neurological determinism. Though differing in important ways, all of these lines of analysis assume some kind of code, which, when cracked, *exhaustively* explains the phenomenon under investigation. Molecular biologist Dean Hammer carries the argument to its logical (or illogical) conclusion in his controversial book *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes*. The genetic modifications that have led to religion are supposed to lend individuals and groups adaptive advantages that increase the chance of their survival. Such an approach is obviously one-sided and cannot do justice to the multiple dimensions of religion and its complex relation to physical and biological systems. Though parading as cutting-edge science, biologism is actually a different version of essentialism, which is consistent with the neofoundationalism threatening the world today.

These remarks suggest that for the most influential critics of the latter half of the twentieth century and their epigones, the three greatest philosophical and political errors of the era are totalization, hegemony, and foundationalism. During the middle decades of the last century, social and cultural critics faced with terrorism on the left (i.e., communism) and the right (i.e., fascism) took as their primary task the subversion of structures of repression by turning their logic against themselves to expose an inherent aporia. Their critical success, however, turned into political failure: the repressed returned to unleash neofoundationalisms harboring terror that is more dangerous because it is more diffuse.

NETWORKING SYMBOLS

If we are to develop an adequate theory of religion that creates the possibility of criticizing flawed orthodoxies and developing alternative visions for the future, it is necessary to learn from but move beyond these influential theories of the recent past. Though structuralism and poststructuralism provide valuable insights, they remain incomplete. Structuralists understand the necessity of forms and patterns for creating the order without which life is impossible, but they cannot explain how these structures emerge and change over time. Having recognized the fatal consequences of fixed forms, poststructuralists insist that vitality is impossible without the repeated disruption and dislocation of static structures. But they have a monolithic view of systems and structures and cannot conceive of structures that act as a whole without necessarily totalizing. It is, therefore, impossible for poststructuralists to move beyond the moment of criticism to fashion new structures that promote creativity. In an effort to overcome these shortcomings and develop a critical perspective adapted to contemporary network culture, I will bring together structuralism and poststructuralism through an appropriation of the theory of complex adaptive systems to interpret the emergence, development, and operational logic of religion. The threads holding the argument together will be drawn from information and network theory.

At a minimum, any adequate theory of religion must

1. describe and/or explain the complex origin, operational logic, and multiple functions of religion;
2. clarify the dynamics of the emergence, development, and transformation of different religious networks;
3. show how religions relate to and interact with each other as well as the physical, biological, social, political, and economic aspects of life; and
4. include a “principle” of “internal” criticism that leaves the theory open to endless revision.

The following definition is designed to meet these requirements:

Religion is an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure.

It is important to emphasize at the outset that this definition of religion identifies two interrelated moments: one that structures and stabilizes and one that destructures and destabilizes. These two moments are inseparable and alternate in a kind of quasi-dialectical rhythm. As the threat of disruption increases, devotees tend to absolutize, reify, or fetishize their beliefs and practices. When this occurs, religion devolves into a religiosity that resists the new by clinging to the old. But such efforts inevitably fail; the deeper the entrenchment, the more likely becomes the very disruption religiosity is designed to avoid. Any theory of religion that concentrates on one of these moments to the exclusion of the other is unsatisfactory.

To begin to unravel the strands in this definition of religion, it is necessary to consider the meaning and operation of *schemata*. I have borrowed this notion from Murray Gell-Mann, who is a Nobel laureate in physics. "In complex adaptive systems," he argues, "information about the environment . . . is not merely listed in what computer scientists would call a look-up table. Instead, the regularities of the experience are encapsulated in highly compressed form as a *model* or *theory* or *schema*. Such a schema is usually approximate, sometimes wrong, but it may be adaptive if it can make useful predictions including interpretation and extrapolation and sometimes generalization to situations very different from those previously encountered."¹² Schemata enable complex adaptive systems to fulfill five critical functions. First, the system must be able to identify regularities in its environment. Every system is embedded in multiple networks that provide streams of data that must be processed. For a system to function effectively, it must be able to identify regularities, patterns, and redundancies in surrounding flows. Second, once a regularity has been identified, the system must generate schemata that enable it to recognize the pattern if it occurs again. For a schema to work well, it must compress as much data as possible. Third, schemata in complex adaptive systems must be able to modify themselves in relation to changing circumstances. Fourth, schemata cannot be merely reactive but must be capable of being deployed to anticipate surrounding activities in a way that guides responsive action. The effectiveness of a schema is a function of the accuracy of its descriptions, the reliability of its predictions of relevant events in the environment, and the effectiveness of the actions it prescribes. Finally, different schemata within a system and schemata in different systems must be able to compete effectively with other schemata. Those that prove to be best adapted to the environment

survive and the others eventually disappear. Gell-Mann offers a concise summary of these points:

In studying any complex adaptive system, we follow what happens to the information. We examine how it reaches the system in the form of a stream of data. . . . We notice how the complex adaptive system perceives regularities in the data stream, sorting them out from features treated as incidental or arbitrary and condensing them into a schema, which is subject to variation. . . . We observe how each of the resulting schemata is then combined with additional information, of the same kind as the incidental information that was put aside in abstracting regularities from the data stream, to generate a result with applications to the real world: a description of an observed system, a prediction of events, or a prescription for behavior for the complex adaptive system itself. . . . Finally, we see how the description, prediction, or behavior has consequences in the real world that feed back to exert 'selection pressures' on the competition among various schemata.¹³

Two seemingly disparate analogies help to clarify the operation of schemata: ancient cosmogonic myths and modern information theory.¹⁴ Creation narratives in many religious traditions recount variations of a common myth of origin: the cosmos emerges from the interplay between the principles of order and chaos. This struggle is represented in the conflict between benevolent and malevolent deities whose specific characteristics vary from tradition to tradition. In the West, the ancient Babylonian epic recounting the battle between Marduk and the marine monster Tiamat reappears in the opening lines of Genesis:

In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light; and God saw that the light was good, and he separated light from darkness. (1:1-4)¹⁵

Water and word correspond respectively to chaos (formless) and order (form). The cosmos appears when order emerges from chaos through formation brought about by the word. Plato presents one of the most influential versions of this narrative in *The Republic*. According to his myth of origin, a Demiurge brings together eternal forms with formless matter, which is always in flux, to create the world as we know it. The world, therefore, is matter in form, or in-formed matter. Every variation of this narrative presupposes one or another set of binary oppositions that

somehow must be mediated or negotiated. Schemata are similar to the forms, and data streams are roughly equivalent to what Plato labels matter. We will see in what follows that schemata, like Platonic forms, are both epistemological and ontological. There are, however, four important differences between the structure and operational logic of schemata and the data stream in complex adaptive systems, on the one hand, and the forms and matter in ontotheological myths of origin, on the other. Schemata are not independent of each other but are interrelated and mutually constitutive. Hence, schemata are neither eternal nor unchanging like the forms but are emergent and evolve over time. Moreover, unlike chaos or matter in cosmogonic myths, the data stream is not completely undifferentiated but harbors implicit relations and patterns. In other words, there is an order to things that is not imposed from without but emerges within the world's fluxes and flows. Finally, order and disorder are not simply opposite but are codependent in such a way that neither can be what it is apart from the other.

The relation between order and chaos in cosmogonic myths can be understood in terms of the interplay between information and noise in information theory. In their groundbreaking book *The Mathematical Theory of Information* (1949), Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver developed a notion of information that differs significantly from the common sense of the term. "The word *information*, in this theory," Weaver explains, "must not be confused with its ordinary usage. In particular, *information* must not be confused with meaning."¹⁶ Meaning, as we will see, arises at a different level from information. According to Shannon and Weaver, information, in the strict sense of the term, is inversely proportional to probability: the more probable something is, the less information it conveys; the less probable it is, the more information it conveys. Gregory Bateson clarifies this notion of information when he explains that "information is a difference that makes a difference."¹⁷ Information must be sufficiently different to convey something new but not so different that it is completely unrecognizable or undetectable. The domain of information, then, lies *between* too little and too much difference. On the one hand, information is a difference and, therefore, in the absence of difference there is no information. On the other hand, information is a difference that *makes a difference*. Not all differences make a difference: if they are redundant, they are inconsequential. Since both too little and too much difference issue in noise, information always emerges at the two-sided edge of chaos. Pattern emerges from noise through the articulation of difference (fig. 1). Information and noise are not merely

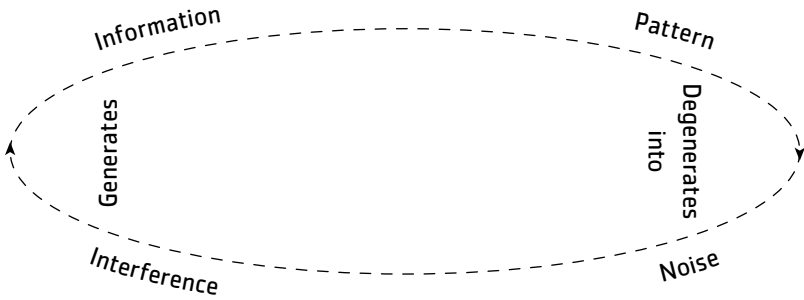


Figure 1. Information and Noise

opposites but coemerge and remain codependent: *information is noise in formation*. Noise, in turn, interrupts by interfering with informative patterns. When understood in this way, information stabilizes noise and noise destabilizes information. Inasmuch as the process of destabilization provides the occasion for the emergence of new informative patterns, it is not merely negative.

With this understanding of information and noise, it is possible to diagram the operation of schemata in complex adaptive systems (fig. 2). Schemata function both theoretically and practically first to screen data in order to detect, form, and reform patterns that simultaneously describe, prefigure, and predict entities and events and second to model adaptive actions in the real world. The viability of schemata depends upon their theoretical accuracy and practical efficacy. New data can lead to the modification or even the destruction of schemata. Neither a priori nor a posteriori, schemata arise within a specific context, which establishes the parameters of constraint that are the conditions of new entities and events. Once having emerged, they continue to develop through a competitive coevolutionary process with other schemata. As we will see in detail below, religious myths and symbols function as schemata in complex adaptive systems. It is important to recognize, however, that schemata are neither necessarily conscious nor deliberately constructed and, thus, are not limited to conscious or self-conscious systems. When fully deployed, schemata self-organize and operate in physical, chemical, and biological as well as social, political, and economic systems. For example, the immune system, the market, and even the process of evolution itself would be impossible without schemata to process information.

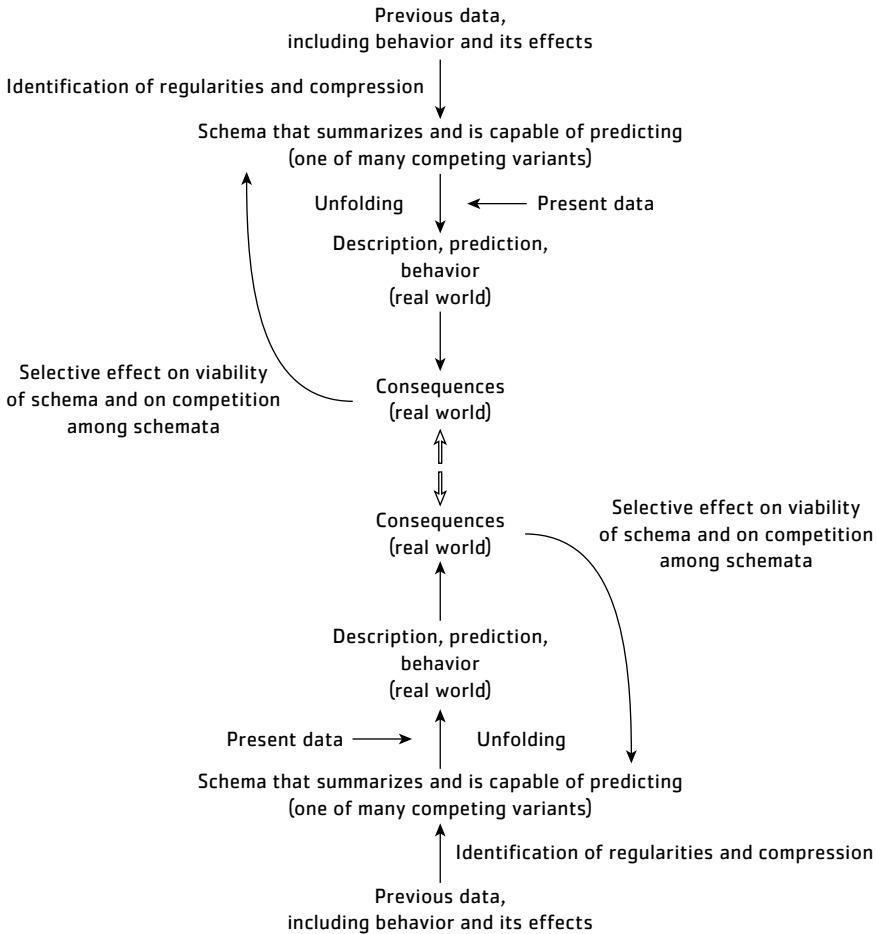


Figure 2. Schemata in Coadaptive Complex Systems (adapted from Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex* [New York: W. H. Freeman, 1994], 25)

To understand how religious symbols and myths function as schemata that lend life meaning and purpose, it is helpful to begin with a consideration of their role in cognitive activity. Theory and praxis, I have noted, are not separate in schemata: descriptive representations provide models of the world that serve as models for activity in the world.¹⁸ Schemata process data in such a way that information, knowledge, and meaning are woven together to create patterns for thought and action, and

these, in turn, bring about revisions and adaptations in the schemata. The patterning of data creates information, which, then, is fashioned into knowledge that can be rendered meaningful. This complex process entails the coordination of different cognitive activities: intuition, perception, consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason.

The relationship among these activities as well as their products is hierarchical yet nonlinear. Each higher level simultaneously emerges from and acts back upon lower levels (fig. 3). Through the process of schematization, subject/object (and self/world) mutually emerge and, therefore, are codependent. It is a mistake to privilege object over subject (empiricism or realism) or subject over object (idealism or social constructivism). Intuitions of the data stream are intuited as sense perceptions and then fashioned into the objects of consciousness. Taken together, these objects form the physical world. With the emergence of the world, it becomes possible for the subject first to become conscious and eventually to turn back on itself to become self-conscious

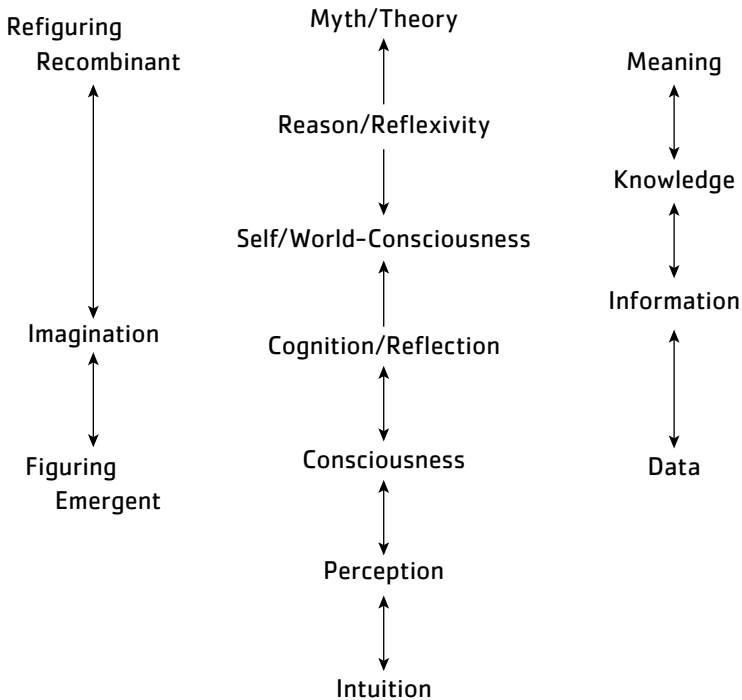


Figure 3. Process of Schematization

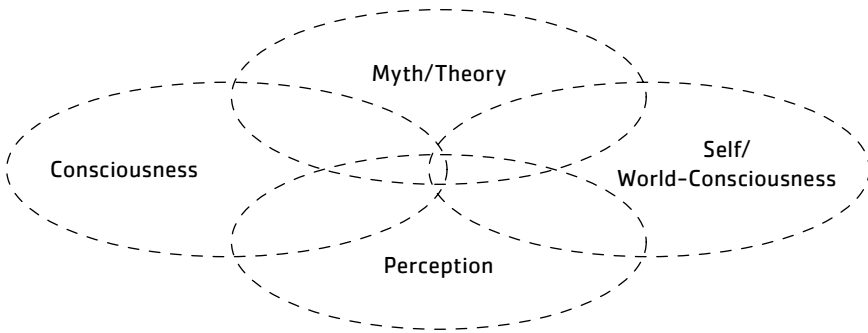


Figure 4. Symbolic / Cognitive Network (I)

(fig. 4). Self-consciousness, however, presupposes not only differentiation from the world but also the relation to the world as well as other self-conscious agents. Subjectivity, in other words, is necessarily intersubjective. Reason doubles self-reflection by joining consciousness and self-consciousness in strange loops that never completely close. The gap in the structure of self-reflexivity creates the opening for the indeterminacy without which creativity is impossible and the future is closed. At the highest level of schematization, symbols and myths integrate sense experience, information, and knowledge into patterns that provide meaning and purpose. Since the relation among these different levels and operations is simultaneous rather than sequential, different cognitive operations mutually condition each other. The images, concepts, and symbols through which the world is organized emerge from and change with the data of experience, which they simultaneously shape. The nonlinearity of these operations creates an *interactive* cognitive network.¹⁹ Even at this microlevel, the structure and operational logic of the cognitive network conform to the complex adaptive systems. Proliferating connections lead to adaptations, which lead to new connections, which lead to further adaptations. . . .

Different schemata function in a similar way at every level of the cognitive network. One of the functions of the imagination is to coordinate other cognitive activities. Just as it is necessary to have an expanded notion of information to understand how physical, chemical, biological, social, political, and economic systems function as information processes, so it is necessary to develop an expanded understanding of the imagination to appreciate how it works throughout the cognitive

network. The imagination *informs* cognitive, which is not necessarily to say conscious, processes through the activity of *figuring*. Since *figuring* (or *figuration*) is a pivotal notion that will return repeatedly throughout the following chapters, it is important to understand it precisely. Both a noun and a verb, *figure* is an unusually rich word, which can mean inter alia: “form, shape; an embodied (human) form; a person considered with regard to visible form or appearance; the image, likeness, or representation of something material or immaterial; an arrangement of lines or other markings forming an ornamental device; to form, shape; to trace, mark; to be an image, symbol, or type; to adorn or mark with figures; to embellish with a design or pattern; to calculate; to take into consideration; to solve, decipher, or comprehend.”²⁰ Drawing on the multiple meanings and nuances of *figure*, the imagination can be understood as the activity of *figuring* through which figures emerge. These figures are the schemata that enable the data of experience to be figured, that is, formed as well as calculated. Schemata and the imagination work together to create complex information-processing networks. As data shift and patterns interact competitively, schemata repeatedly adjust by refiguring themselves. The activity of the imagination, therefore, has two sides: *figuring*, which is emergent (i.e., productive and creative), and *refiguring*, which is recombinant (i.e., reproductive and re-creative).

Insofar as every figure presupposes the process of *figuring*, it includes as a condition of its own possibility something that cannot be figured. That is to say, figures “include” but do not incorporate something that can be neither represented nor comprehended. Figures, therefore, are always disfigured *as if* from within. Far from a flaw, this disfiguring keeps figures open and as such is the necessary condition of emergent creativity. These two sides of the imagination correspond to the two moments of religion. While figures structure and stabilize, *figuring* disrupts, dislocates, and destabilizes every ostensibly stabilizing schema, even as it invites a new schematization.

Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of symbolic networks, it is important to note that the complex nonlinearity of cognitive networks calls into question any theory that associates religion exclusively with thinking (cognition), acting (volition), or feeling (affection) (fig. 5). From the eighteenth century to the present, many of the most influential interpreters of religion have tended to concentrate on one of these faculties at the expense of the other two.²¹ If, however, cognitive networks are wired as I have described them, different faculties cannot be separated, because they are interactive. Feeling, thinking, and acting

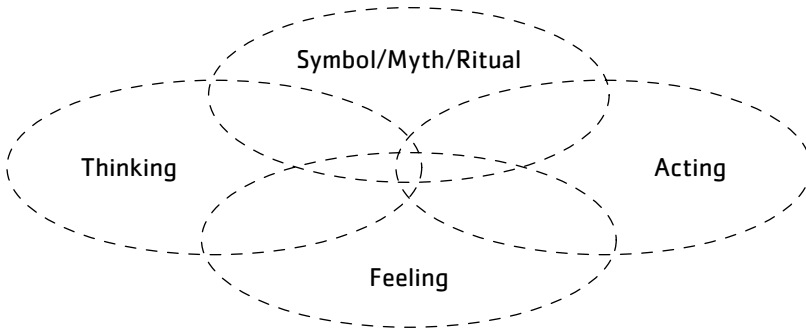


Figure 5. Symbolic / Cognitive Network (II)

mutually influence each other; as one changes, the others inevitably are modified. Symbols, myths, and rituals both condition and are conditioned by these interactions.

Symbols, myths, and rituals form and are formed by networks, which, in turn, form and are formed by more expansive webs. Just as different schemata arise through competitive interaction, so symbolic networks coemerge and coevolve in relational webs that function according to the principles of complex adaptive systems. Regardless of context, all complex adaptive systems have the following characteristics:

1. They are composed of many codependent parts connected in multiple and changing ways.
2. They display spontaneous self-organization, which occurs within parameters of constraint that leave space for the aleatory.
3. The structures resulting from spontaneous self-organization emerge from but are not necessarily reducible to the components in the system.
4. Self-organizing structures are open and, therefore, are able to adapt and coevolve with other structures.
5. As connectivity increases, networks become more complex and drift toward disequilibrium until they reach a tipping point, when a discontinuous phase shift occurs.

Since the structure and functional logic of complex adaptive systems are isomorphic across media ranging from the so-called material to the so-called immaterial, networks are always networks of other networks. In different terms, complex adaptive networks are fractal—they display

the same structure at every organizational level and in every operational phase.

To function religiously, symbolic networks must address theological, anthropological, and cosmological issues. These three dimensions of experience are articulated in the interrelated figures of God, self, and world or their functional equivalents (fig. 6). Theology, anthropology, and cosmology mutually condition each other: the way in which God is imagined determines the way in which the self and the world are conceived and vice versa. In theistic traditions, for example, God is believed to be a quasi-personal being who creates and governs the world. As we will see in detail below, traditionally there have been two alternatives within the parameters of this vision: either God's will follows God's reason, in which case the world is ultimately comprehensible, or God's will is antecedent to reason, in which case the world is radically contingent and irreducibly mysterious. Human being, correspondingly, is understood either as essentially rational or as governed by the irrational or, more accurately, arational will, drives, and desires. Other ideas and doctrines characteristic of a particular symbolic network— notions of good and evil, time and space, history and nature, fall and redemption, etc.— can be interpolated from these three nodal concepts. When religion is understood as a complex adaptive network, it becomes clear that these contrasting theological alternatives are coimplicated in such a way that neither can be itself apart from the other and each becomes itself in and through the other.

Like everything else, symbolic networks are never formed in isolation but emerge in complex relational webs within and among tradi-

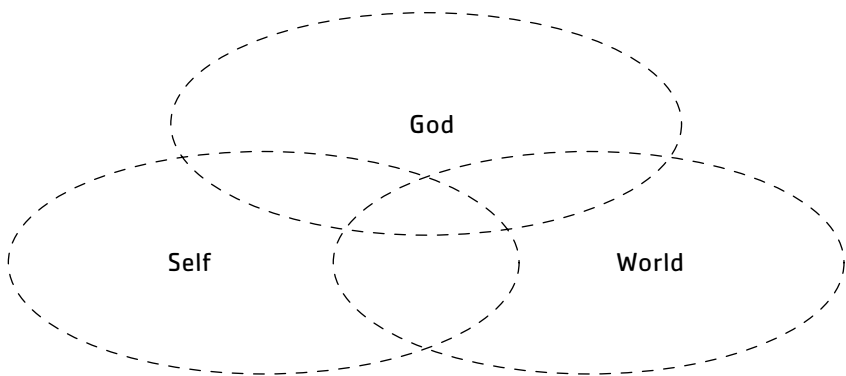


Figure 6. Religious Network

tions. These webs have synchronic and diachronic axes, which issue in the codependence and coevolution of particular symbolic networks (fig. 7). The specificity of any symbolic network within a tradition is a function of its similarities to and differences from other religious alternatives available at a given moment in time (synchronic axis). Today's Evangelical Protestants, for example, define themselves by their relation to other Christian sects and denominations as well as their opposition to so-called secular humanists. In addition to this, every religious position is also temporally and historically situated—it grows out of a past that shapes it and anticipates a future that can transform it (diachronic axis).²² The endless interplay among competing versions of the “same” tradition results in constant revisions and repeated reformations. So understood, history is neither linear nor circular.

Just as no version of a particular tradition can emerge apart from other versions of that tradition, so every religious tradition is constituted by its interactions with other religious traditions. Different traditions provide contrasting symbolic networks, which offer alternative schemata for figuring meaning and purpose. The multiple vectors in these diagrams suggest the webs in which competing symbolic networks are articulated (fig. 8). The dynamics between and among traditions are the same as the dynamics within a single tradition. As the interrelation of competing schemata increases, the stability of particular traditions and of the webs connecting them decreases. There are three characteristic responses to the growing volatility and insecurity that result from these developments: conservative, progressive, and transformative.

Religious traditions and cultural institutions tend to be deeply resistant to change. Conservatives cling to the old and resist the new. There are, of course, different degrees of resistance, ranging from traditionalists to reactionaries. When societies change, many seek security and stability through traditional beliefs and practices. As the rate of change increases, a more radical reaction tends to set in. True believers set themselves apart from infidels by constructing an ideal past, which, they believe, has been corrupted in the present. The goal becomes to “recover” this past by purifying the present through the conversion or elimination of nonbelievers. Devotion to this reactionary agenda tends to absolutize faith in unquestionable foundational principles and, in many cases, is accompanied by total obedience to authoritative figures. Reactionaries can be found today, for example, in all three religions of the book: ultranationalistic, hyperorthodox Jews; militarist, internationally revanchist Muslims; and morally absolutist, internationally expansionist, of-

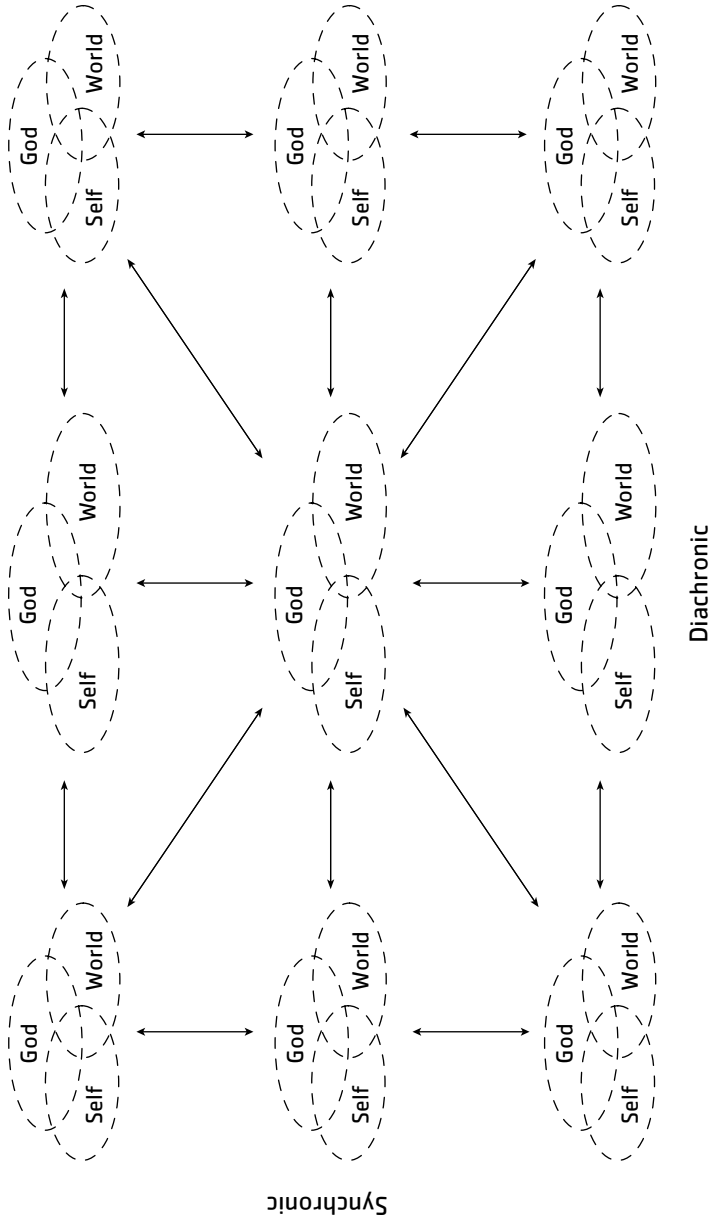


Figure 7. Web of Symbolic Networks in a Single Religious Tradition

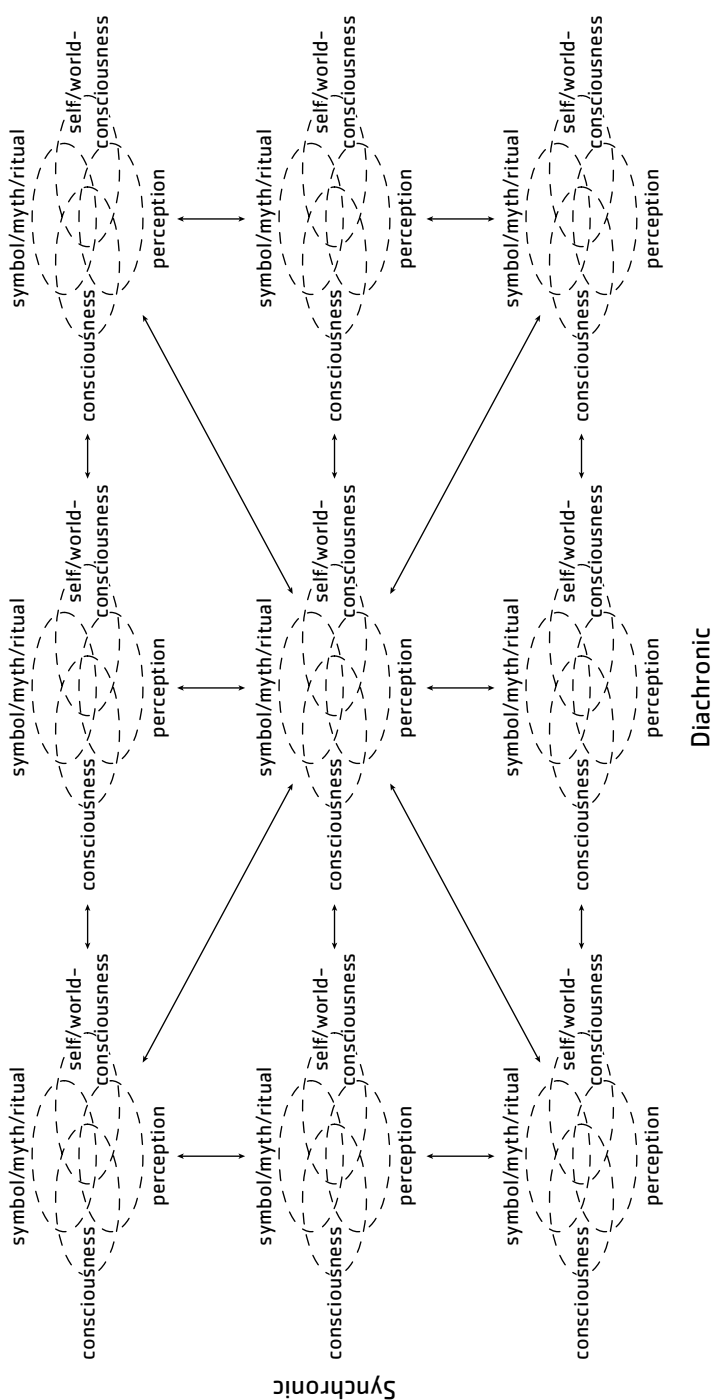


Figure 8. Webs of Symbolic Networks in Multiple Religious Traditions

ten millennialist Christians. Though obviously different in many ways, these forms of belief share more with each other than they do with many strands in their respective traditions. Religious reactionaries provide the clearest example of the religiosity that absolutizes the relative by reifying or fetishizing a particular version of an emergent complex symbolic network.

In the opinion of many believers, however, reactionary responses are not only counterproductive but actually dangerous. Simplistic and unbending faith in a complex and changing world carries the threat of violence and destruction. To avoid disaster, progressive critics of reactionary foundationalism counsel the selective adaptation of beliefs and practices to changing circumstances. The nature, scope, and rate of change promoted by different groups lend them their specific identity. Regardless of period or context, such believers are liberals or modernists who understand that religious traditions and systems must change if they are to remain viable. As the voices of conflicting religious orthodoxies have risen to fever pitch in recent years, however, the voices of religious liberals in different traditions have fallen silent. Indeed, in today's world the ascendancy of neofoundationalism has made the notion of religious liberalism virtually oxymoronic. For conservatives, traditionalists, and reactionaries, the willingness of self-confessed believers to modify faith to accommodate contemporary circumstances provides further evidence of the moral decline that fuels outrage.

During periods of great instability like our own, incremental change cannot continue forever. As worldwide webs expand, competing visions clash and create noise that amplifies until the networks in which schemata are formed reach what complexity theorists describe as a condition of "self-organized criticality" or, in a more popular idiom, the tipping point. Physicist Per Bak has analyzed such events in great detail and has developed a theoretical explanation of them. He goes so far as to propose a new "science of self-organized criticality," which will disclose previously undetected laws that illuminate the nonlinear dynamics of complex systems. "Complex behavior in nature," Bak argues, "reflects the tendency of large systems with many components to evolve into a poised 'critical' state, way out of balance, where minor disturbances may lead to events called avalanches, of all sizes. Most of the changes take place through catastrophic events rather than by following a smooth gradual path. The evolution of this very delicate state occurs without design from any outside agent. The state is established solely because of the dynamical interactions among individual elements of the system:

the critical state is *self-organized*.”²³ Self-organized criticality occurs in complex systems governed by nonlinear dynamics. As a result of this nonlinearity, events are amplified through positive feedback loops and can have effects disproportionate to their causes. Dynamic interactions among individual elements in the system generate global events that require a holistic description that cannot be reduced to an account of individual elements. When a system reaches the tipping point, the effect of individual events becomes unpredictable. While it is possible to know that at some point a significant change or avalanche will occur, it is never possible to predict which event will tip the balance and upset the equilibrium.

Bak’s analysis of natural systems can be extended to symbolic networks. As conditions in the world change more quickly than the schemata that figure them, the map no longer fits the territory and orientation becomes more and more difficult. In the absence of familiar signposts and reliable guides, meaning and purpose become obscure. Incremental change eventually gives way to systemic transformation in which new schemata emerge from the competition and combinatorial play of old figures and forms. By unsettling organizing structures that do not adapt well to changing circumstances, the activity of figuring creates the conditions for the evolution or, more precisely, the coevolution of more effective schemata and symbolic networks. The evolutionary success of schemata and networks in rapidly changing environments presupposes the capacity

1. to accommodate increasing interconnection and, therefore, growing complexity,
2. to manage increasing volatility and instability effectively,
3. to remain open and adaptive, and
4. to change quickly and efficiently.

Evolution—be it biological or religious—is not a continuous process but is characterized by what biologists describe as *punctuated equilibrium*. Periods of relative stability and gradual change are interrupted by phase shifts that lead to structural and morphological transformations. Since development is punctuated rather than continuous, change is episodic and unpredictable. Within the coevolutionary framework of connected networks, disruptions are simultaneously destructive and creative. In whatever medium evolution occurs, there can no more be construction without deconstruction than there can be deconstruction without construction. Once articulated, new configurations inevitably

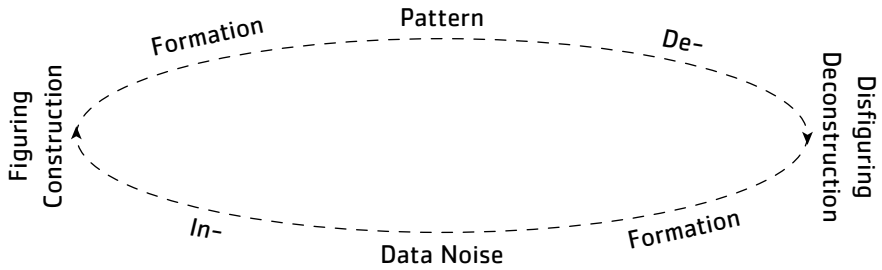


Figure 9. Imagination

drift toward the edge of chaos, where the process repeats itself. If understood in this way, the operation of emergent complex adaptive networks of symbols, myths, and rituals involves information processes that figure changing organizational patterns. Such figuring extends the activity of the imagination beyond the limits of the human mind to processes embodied in nature and history²⁴ (fig. 9). Just as information emerges from noise in formation, so figuring and disfiguring issue in and constantly transform the figures and patterns that lend life ever-changing meaning and purpose in the absence of secure foundations. To appreciate the far-reaching implications of this insight, a further extension of the relational webs in which religious symbols, myths, and rituals are embedded is necessary. Having traced the emergence of schemata and symbolic networks within single and among multiple religious traditions, it is now necessary to consider their relation to broader natural, social, and cultural patterns.

As I have indicated, emergent complex adaptive networks are not limited to culture but can be found throughout the natural and social systems that compose the everyday world. They are not, in other words, merely subjective and epistemological but are also objective and ontological. In the final two chapters I will attempt to show how life itself is an emergent complex adaptive network that harbors important religious dimensions, ethical norms, and political imperatives. In the present context, it is important to stress that networks and webs have the same structure and operational logic in natural, social, and cultural systems. Moreover, the interrelation and coevolution of nature, society, and culture are also governed by the dynamics of emergent complex adaptive networks (fig. 10). Whole and part are isomorphic; once again, inter-related networks display a fractal design. Networks are networks of net-

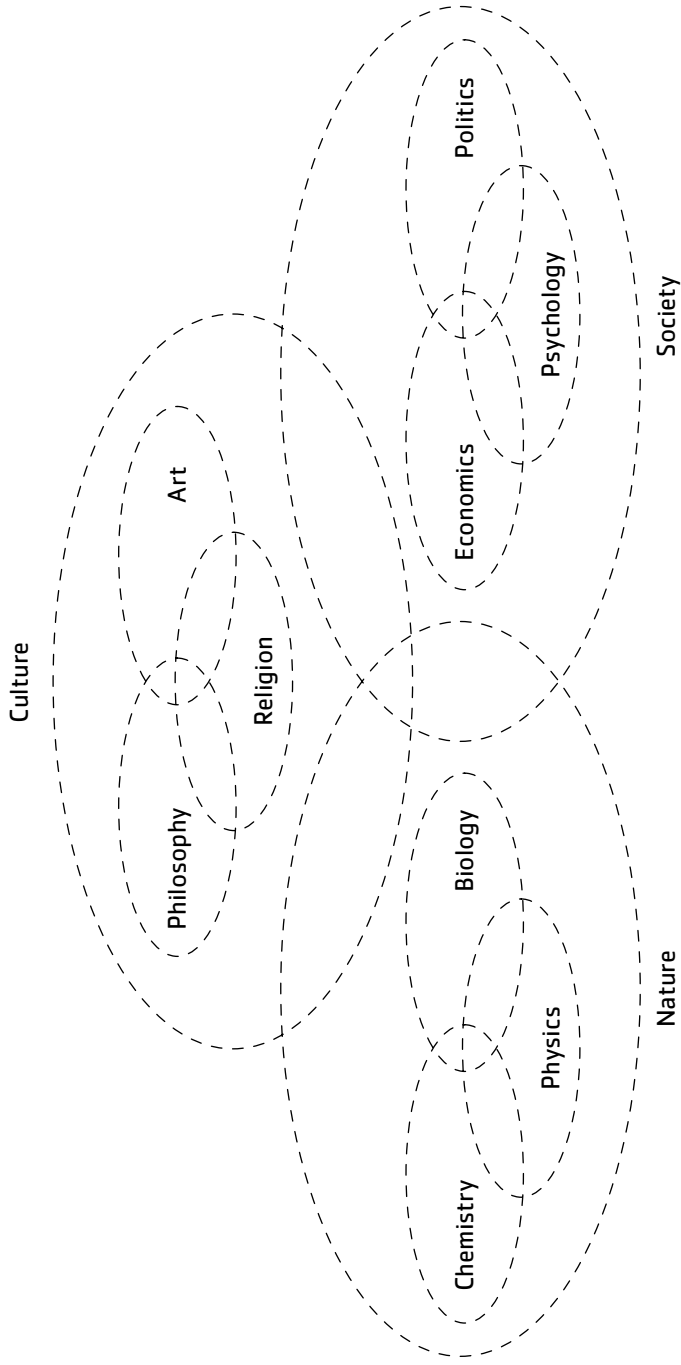


Figure 10. Codependence of Nature, Society, and Culture

works that emerge through iteration and interrelation. Nature, society, and culture mutually condition and codetermine each other as a result of the nonlinear dynamics of networks. Culture, for example, conditions nature as much as nature conditions culture.

To complete this already-complex picture, a final factor must be added: technology. Technological developments simultaneously grow out of and act back upon natural, social, and cultural systems. Technology, of course, is not limited to the human world but extends to the realm of animals and even beyond to simpler so-called lower forms of life. Within the human domain, the shift from mechanical to electronic forms of production and reproduction marks a tipping point that profoundly transforms the relation of technology to nature, society, and culture (fig. 11). If natural, social, and cultural processes are, in effect, distributed information processes, then the digital revolution is creating technologies whose structure and function not only reflect but more importantly amplify and transform what is already occurring in the world. When information machines are connected in webs that have the same structure as natural, social, and cultural systems, coevolution becomes inevitable even if its direction is impossible to predict. This development leads to a further obscuring of the line between nature and culture or natural and artificial systems. With the deepening understanding of the genome and the growing sophistication of digital and nanotechnologies, bioinformatics will be to the near future what computers have been to the recent past. As information and biological processes increasingly interface, life itself will change, and the interrelation of nature, society, and culture will be radically reconfigured.

These insights and developments obviously have important implications for the study of religion as well as all other cultural phenomena. If the real world is a relational network, it cannot be comprehended through conceptual grids that create divisions and oppositions rather than links and connections. For knowledge to be possible, the structure and development of cognition must be consistent with the structure and development of investigated phenomena. If the mind is wired one way and the world another way, the world as such remains unknowable. As we have seen, however, subject/object, self/world, and mind/phenomena are not opposites but coemerge and coevolve in shared networks and webs. Cognitive processes, therefore, are implicated in objects and events through recursive feedback loops that constantly reconfigure them. The constantly changing interrelations that create greater complexity also constitute the conditions for the reliability of whatever knowledge we have.

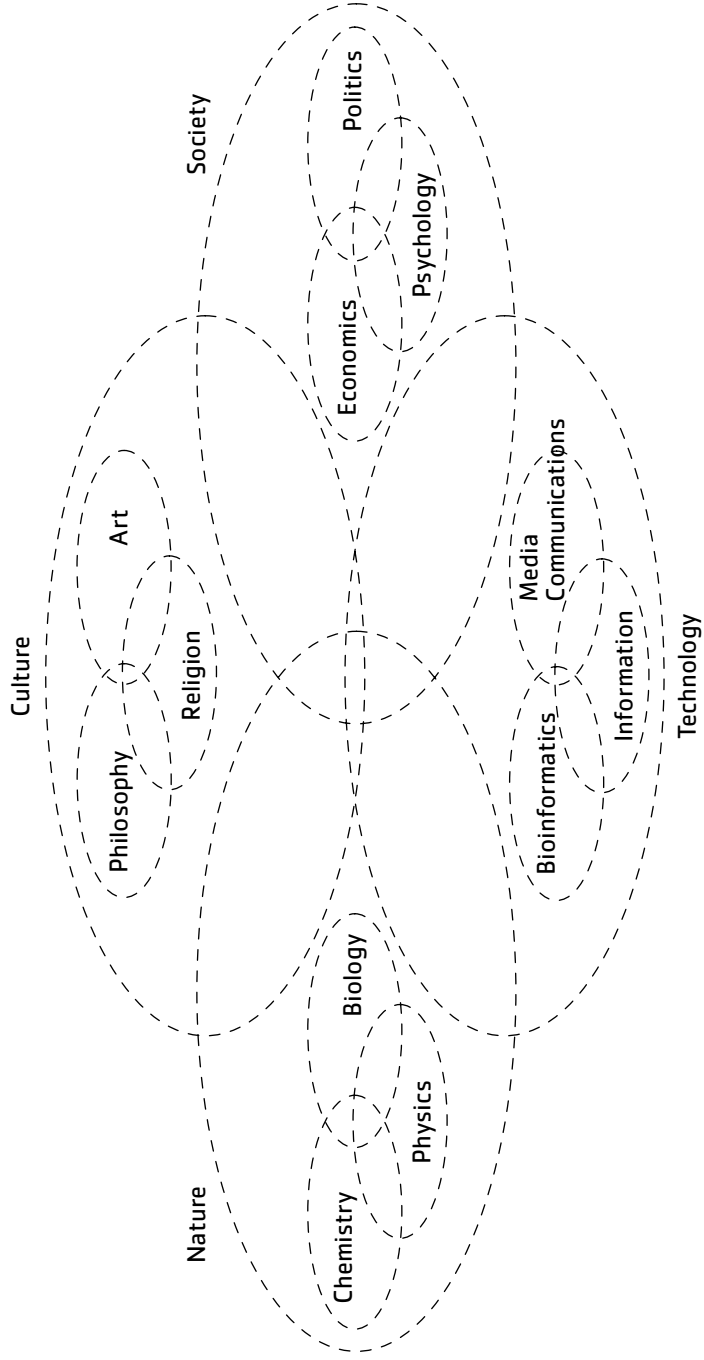


Figure 11. Codependence of Nature, Society, Culture, and Technology

As knowledge evolves, the organization of curricula, universities, and academic professions must be transformed. Concentration and specialization are necessary but not sufficient to understand the complexities of the contemporary world. Creative insights emerge at the margins—in the gaps between and among established disciplines. Academic disciplines, like religious systems, resist change as long as possible. As maps drift apart from territories, disciplines eventually reach the tipping point and lines of inquiry must be redrawn. With the limits of hyperspecialization becoming undeniable, a phase shift is beginning to occur along “the edges and inchings” of inquiry. To pursue this emerging trajectory, it is necessary to approach religion from multiple perspectives and to place it in the context not only of different religious traditions but also of other cultural systems (i.e., philosophy, art, music, theater, dance, etc.), as well as social (economics, politics, psychology, etc.)²⁵ and natural systems (i.e., physical, chemical, and biological). Since these systems are interdependent, one cannot be reduced to the other and, therefore, every form of reductive foundationalism is illegitimate.

At the outset of this analysis, I claimed that at a minimum any adequate theory of religion must

1. describe and/or explain the complex origin, operational logic, and multiple functions of religion;
2. clarify the dynamics of the emergence, development, and transformation of different religious networks;
3. show how religions relate to and interact with each other as well as the physical, biological, social, political, and economic aspects of life; and
4. include a “principle” of “internal” criticism that leaves the theory open to endless revision.

I then proceeded to define religion as an emergent complex adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure. The explanation and elaboration of this definition have been designed to meet the established criteria. In the following chapters, I will attempt to show how this theory, which grows out of the Western philosophical and theological tradition, can help us to understand and criticize the role of religion in contemporary society and how this perspective can be elaborated to fashion an alternative religious vision that promotes a global ethic of life. Before proceeding with this admit-

tedly ambitious program, it is necessary to examine the general characteristics of the alternative ways of being religious, which can be found throughout history and continue to define the poles of current religious conflict.

THREE WAYS OF BEING RELIGIOUS

In his classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, William James defines religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.”²⁶ While James designed this definition to be as inclusive as possible by insisting that religion does not necessarily presuppose belief in God, his perspective remains limited in at least two important ways. First, and most obviously, by focusing on the solitary individual, James reduces the social dimensions of selfhood and aspects of religion to a secondary status. Any approach to the study of religion that privileges the individual at the expense of the social or vice versa is inadequate. Second, James acknowledges that religion involves different ways of thinking and acting but concentrates on *experience*, which he regards as primarily affective. This unnecessarily limits his analysis in ways that tend to obscure the interplay of cognition, volition, and affection. Though his method is empirical and is largely limited to description, his approach is surprisingly similar to the phenomenological analysis that Eliade eventually developed. Like Eliade, James assumes that there is such a thing as human nature and that religion or its functional equivalent is inseparable from it. Unlike Eliade, however, James does not think there is only one type of religious experience. He identifies two basic varieties of religious experience—healthy-mindedness and the sick soul—which he analyzes through a richly documented comparison. “In many persons,” James points out,

happiness is congenital and irreclaimable. “Cosmic emotions” inevitably takes in them the form of enthusiasm and freedom. I speak not only to those who are animally happy, I mean those who, when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them, positively refuse to feel it, as if it were something mean and wrong. We find such persons in every age, passionately flinging themselves upon their sense of the goodness of life, in spite of the hardships of their own condition, and in spite of the sinister theologies into which they may be born. From the outset their religion is one of union with the divine.

The healthy-minded person enjoys a sense of “religious gladness,” which makes “deliverance from any antecedent burden” seem unnecessary. The most important aspect of this type of religion is the conviction that there is an original union or identity between self and God, which persists throughout life and renders all evil and corruption epiphenomenal. While James places two movements, which were influential in New England at the time, in this category—Unitarianism and Protestant liberalism—he insists that the clearest examples are romantic poets and philosophical idealists like Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.²⁷

The sick soul is the polar opposite of the healthy-minded type. “In contrast with such healthy-minded views,” James explains, “if we treat them as a way of deliberately minimizing evil, stands a radically opposite view, a way of maximizing evil, if you please so to call it, based on the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence, and that the world’s meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart.” What meaning life has for the sick soul, however, is severely limited because there are unavoidable elements “of the universe which may make no rational whole in conjunction with the other elements, and which, from the point of view of any system which those other elements make up, can only be considered so much irrelevance and accident—so much ‘dirt,’ as it were, and matter out of place.” The pervasiveness of evil and absence of meaning lead to a sense of melancholy, which tends to degenerate into “self-mistrust and self-despair; or . . . suspicion, anxiety, trepidation, fear.” When despair becomes overwhelming, there are only three ways to overcome it: death or suicide, flight from the corrupt world, or radical self-transformation. While healthy-minded individuals are once-born, sick souls are twice-born—they must pass through a dark night of the soul to find redemption. One of the most striking examples of a sick soul is someone James strangely never mentions in *Varieties*: Søren Kierkegaard. The titles of Kierkegaard’s best-known works disclose the temper of his soul: *Fear and Trembling*, *The Concept of Dread*, *The Sickness unto Death*. Since James is convinced that human experience inevitably includes good and evil as well as light and darkness, he argues that “morbid-mindedness ranges over a wider scale of experience.” The self, he argues, is always divided and man, therefore, is *Homo Duplex*. The therapeutic function of religion is to unify the divided subject. Though James never admits it, his typology repeats the familiar religious narrative that recounts the movement from original unity (the healthy-minded) through division and opposition (the sick soul) to unity and reconciliation (the twice-born).

As I have noted, James's concentration on experience and preoccupation with description prevented him from working out the far-reaching implications of the varieties of religious experience he identifies. Nearly half a century later, Paul Tillich published a provocative essay entitled "Two Types of Philosophy of Religion," in which he effectively extends James's analysis by explaining its philosophical presuppositions and theological implications. Though he was working in a completely different intellectual tradition with very different interests, the two types of philosophy of religion Tillich defines are strictly parallel to James's two varieties of religious experience. Tillich organizes his analysis around the traditional arguments for the existence of God: the ontological argument and the cosmological argument, which, he maintains, includes the teleological argument. While the ontological argument proceeds from the thought to the being of God, the cosmological approach argues from effect (the existence or design of the world) to God as necessary and sufficient cause. Tillich associates the former type with Augustinianism and the latter with Thomism. "One can distinguish two ways of approaching God: the way of overcoming estrangement and the way of meeting a stranger. In the first way man discovers *himself* when he discovers God; he discovers something from which he is estranged, but from which he never has been and never can be separated. In the second way, man meets a *stranger* when he meets God. The meeting is accidental. Essentially they do not belong to each other."²⁸ While James focuses on experience, Tillich is preoccupied with knowledge. According to Tillich, the ontological type of philosophy of religion entails the following claims:

1. The knowledge of God is knowledge of truth.
2. The question of God (i.e., truth) presupposes an implicit knowledge of God (i.e., truth).
3. God is Being or the power of Being.
4. Epistemology and ontology are inseparable.
5. Self and God are ultimately identical.

"The Augustinian tradition," Tillich concludes, "can rightly be called mystical, if mysticism is defined as the experience of the identity of subject and object in relation to being itself." If God is Being or, in Tillich's terms, "the power of Being," then everything that exists is, in some way, united with the divine and evil is ultimately unreal. God, in other words, is immanent in self and world.

In the cosmological type, by contrast, God is not Being itself but is

a being, who is transcendent to, rather than immanent in, the world. The relation between the human and divine, therefore, is mediated or indirect. “For Thomas,” Tillich argues, “all this follows from his sense-bound epistemology: ‘The human intellect cannot reach by natural virtue the divine substance, because, according to the way of the present life, the cognition of our intellect starts with the senses.’ From there we must ascend to God with the help of the category of causality.” In the cosmological type, knowledge of God is a posteriori rather than a priori as it is in the ontological type. God or truth, therefore, is the conclusion and not the presupposition of argumentation. Because God is transcendent, human reason alone cannot reach the final truth of the divine. At the limit of human understanding, faith must supplement reason.

While James gives priority to the sick soul over the healthy-minded, Tillich privileges the ontological over the cosmological type. He actually goes so far as to maintain that the cosmological type represents “a destructive cleavage” that establishes oppositions that inevitably lead to human estrangement. Such estrangement or alienation can be overcome only through the recognition of a more primal unity that is always *present* beneath or behind every form of separation. Summarizing this important point, Tillich writes: “The ontological principle in the philosophy of religion may be stated in the following way: *Man is immediately aware of something unconditional which is the prius of the separation and interaction of subject and object, theoretically and practically.*” To overcome the cleavage between the finite and the infinite, it is necessary to return to unity with the divine, which is never really absent. Tillich, like James, revises the biblical narrative by erasing its primal distinction between creator and creature and rewriting Creation, Fall, and Redemption as the movement from unity through opposition to reunion.

When taken together, James’s two varieties of religious experience and Tillich’s two types of philosophy of religion provide helpful insights for analyzing and organizing particular symbolic networks within, between, and among religious traditions. Though useful for historical purposes, any such twofold typology is, however, finally inadequate for understanding the interrelation of nature, society, and culture in today’s culturally pluralistic world. The analyses of James and Tillich must, therefore, be refined and extended in two ways. First, it is necessary to identify and explore a third alternative that has emerged explicitly only recently but that the other two religious frameworks actually presuppose; and second, typological analysis must be recast in terms of schemata as they have been described in our consideration of symbolic networks. James’s varieties and Tillich’s types tend to be static and, therefore, do

not enable us to understand how religious networks adapt and evolve. Furthermore, their influential accounts do not offer a way to articulate the interrelation of elements within a particular symbolic network or the relations between and among different traditions. Schemata, as we have seen, emerge from and adapt to patterns in the stream of experience and coevolve with other schemata. In addition to the monistic and dualistic schemata, it is necessary to include a complex schema. While the monistic type roughly corresponds to James's healthy-mindedness and Tillich's ontological type, the dualistic type is generally equivalent to the sick soul and the cosmological type. Neither monistic nor dualistic schemata, however, illuminate the operational logic of religion in contemporary emerging network culture. In order to define the distinctive contours of these three schemata, I will consider the position of each alternative on six critical issues that grow out of the interplay of God, self, and world in different symbolic networks: the locus of the real, the relation of identity and difference, the source of order, the status of time and history, the relation of self to world, and the prospect of redemption (table 1).

Every religious schema must provide a way to figure the real. It is, therefore, necessary to begin by asking how the real is conceived and where it is located. Is it here or elsewhere? Above or below? Inside or outside? In the past, the present, or the future? In the first religious schema, the real one is always in some way *present* here and now. Since it is not elsewhere, the relation to the real is immediate, implicit, or direct and, thus, requires neither intermediaries nor mediation. Though not always obvious, the real is immanent in natural and historical processes as their generative ground and unifying principle. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, difference, diversity, and multiplicity are unreal; an original unity is always antecedent to and a condition of the possibility of all separation and division. Differences once articulated can become oppositions, but the unity grounding them is never lost. In many variations of this schema, primal unity is initially implicit and unfolds gradually. To invoke a familiar metaphor, the oak is in the acorn, or in a more contemporary idiom, temporal development is programmed before it begins. History, then, is an archaeoteological process in which the beginning comes to full realization at the end. This circularity is captured in the alternating rhythms of the loss and recovery of unity. Though the future often seems uncertain, retrospectively it becomes clear that things could not have been otherwise. Since the real is immanent in nature and history, the self is at home in the universe. The challenge facing individual subjects is not to change themselves or the world but to learn

Table 1. Religious Schemata

	MONISTIC (BOTH/AND)	DUALISTIC (EITHER/OR)	COMPLEX (NEITHER/NOR)
Locus of the real	Present Immanent	Absent Transcendent	Neither absent nor present Neither transcendent nor immanent
Relation of identity and difference	Identity-without-difference Negation epiphenomenal	Identity-in-opposition-to-difference Affirmation-by-negation	Identity-in-difference / difference-in-identity Affirmation of affirmation and negation
Source of order	Implicit Unfolds gradually	External Imposed from without	Emergent Spontaneous self-organization
Status of time and history	Archaeoteleological process	Struggle between closed systems	Interplay of open systems
Relation of self to world	Primordially unified At home in the universe	Primordially divided Estranged from the world as it is	Nodular Infinite restlessness
Possibility of redemption	Realized eschatology Always already redeemed (actual)	Apocalyptic eschatology Redemption certain but in the future (possible)	Emergent creativity (virtual)

to accept what is as what ought to be. This framework implies an ethics of compliance rather than resistance. Forever at one with the real, the self is always already redeemed. This is a realized eschatology in which salvation is at hand here and now.

The second schema is dualistic: the real is not present here and now but is absent or, more precisely, is elsewhere. In theological terms, the real is transcendent. Such transcendence can be expressed spatially or temporally; accordingly, the real can be conceived, on the one hand, as above or below and, on the other hand, as in the past or the future. Such transcendence establishes a foundational opposition between the real and the not-real, which, in turn, grounds a series of related structural oppositions that simultaneously provide order and carry the threat of disorder. At the most rudimentary level, the relation—or nonrelation—between the real and the not-real entails the exclusive logic of either/or in which identity is established by opposition to difference. In contrast to the monistic schema, here differences are not finally identical but are constituted oppositionally and, thus, remain irreducible. The logic of either/or always appears to be precise, and therefore, it seems to be possible to make theoretical and practical distinctions with precision, clarity, and certainty.

Since there is no direct, essential, or implicit association with the real, the relation to and awareness of it are not immediate but must be mediated. Insofar as the religious imagination conceives the real in terms of God, awareness of and relation to it must be given or revealed through intermediaries like prophets, saints, and messiahs or in rituals and oral and written sacred texts. Within this schema, the history of religions is, in large measure, the story of competing narratives about various intermediaries, which are constructed to establish and maintain the relation between the real and the not-real. Though details obviously vary, the binary structure of all such schemes remains the same. Since the real is transcendent rather than immanent, the relation to it is contingent instead of necessary. The difference between the real and everything else tends to lead to the contrast between those who are chosen and those who are not. In other words, the opposition between the transcendent and the immanent translates into intraworldly oppositions between good and evil, believers and nonbelievers, redeemed and condemned, etc.²⁹ If meaning and order are not intrinsic but are extrinsic, the significance and purpose of things and events can be established only by pointing beyond them. For those with eyes to see, everything becomes a sign referring to a transcendent referent, which secures the foundation of knowledge and basis of action. In an alternative idiom, if one knows

the algorithms God prescribes, it is possible to decode the program of both personal and cosmic history.

The logic of either/or leads to closed systems that make negotiation difficult and compromise often impossible. The situation can become perilous when equally self-certain and uncompromising closed systems encounter each other. Though appearing to be radically different, these polar or binary opposites are actually mirror images of each other. The structure of both systems is the same but the signs are reversed: what is positive in one is negative in the other and vice versa. Both sides subscribe to a vision of history as the tale of struggle with the evil Other. As long as the forces of evil—however they are conceived—are not vanquished, things are not as they ought to be. If the real is not fully present here and now, it must be affirmed by negating what currently exists. Individuals and communities find meaning and purpose by participating in the struggle to destroy the darkness of the present age so that the light of a new world order can dawn. The eschaton might be delayed but for true believers there is no doubt it will arrive.

The complex type is the third religious schema. In contrast to the monistic and dualistic types, the real in this case is neither present nor absent; rather, it is irreducibly interstitial or liminal and as such is *virtual*. It is important to understand the precise meaning of *virtual* in this context. The virtual is not simply the possible but is the *matrix* in which possibility and actuality emerge. While the logic of monism is both/and and the logic of dualism is either/or, the logic of complexity is neither/nor. Rather than the synthesis or union of the first and the second, the third schema is the condition of their possibility, which they presuppose but cannot include or comprehend. In this way, the complex schema exposes the inadequacy of every version of monism and dualism. Nothing is either simple or self-identical because everything is codependent and co-evolves. Identity and difference, for example, are not oppositional but are thoroughly relational: each is relative to the other, and thus each inhabits and is inhabited by the other. Instead of wrapping identities in a solipsistic shroud, such relativity or, more precisely, *relationalism* draws them out of themselves in a creative play of differences.³⁰ In this schema, to be is to be related, or in current terms, *to be is to be connected*. Neither self-identical nor oppositional subjectivity is nodular.³¹ As the shifting site of multiple interfaces, nodular subjectivity not only screens the sea of information in which it is immersed but is itself a screen displaying what it is and what it is not.

Far from merely possible, imaginary, or unreal, the virtual is the elu-

sive real in and through which everything that exists comes into being and passes away. Always betwixt and between, it is neither immanent nor transcendent—neither here and now nor elsewhere and beyond. To the contrary, the virtual is something like an immanent transcendence, which is inside as an outside that cannot be incorporated. This interior exterior or exterior interior is the source of the endless disruption that keeps complex systems open and makes them subject to constant transformation yet also preserves them from disintegration and simple extinction. Nothing remains stable, secure, or certain; rather than forces to be repressed, instability, insecurity, and uncertainty are the conditions of creativity. Disorder is not the opposite of order but, if it does not lead to systemic collapse, can make new forms of order possible. Such order, therefore, is neither inherent (as in monism) nor imposed from without (as in dualism) but emerges from the ceaseless interplay of interacting elements and agents. Infinite restlessness issues in emergent creativity. Within this schema, the goal is neither to accept what is as what ought to be nor to negate what is in an effort to affirm what ought to be; rather, the aim of life is to embrace the infinitely creative process whose purpose is nothing other than itself. Instead of present or deferred, the end is always emerging by forever withdrawing.

These three schemata bear a complicated relation to time. Though monism, dualism, and complexity develop successively, their relation is not strictly linear. An earlier schema obviously can persist after a later schema emerges. It is, after all, possible to be a committed monist or dualist in an era of complexity. The schemata can, therefore, overlap. More importantly, the third schema is not the culminating synthesis of the other two. The complex schema is the nonsynthetic third, which bends back, though not precisely on itself, to inscribe the margin of difference between monism and dualism. As such, complexity is the matrix in which monism and dualism are figured. In other words, the virtual reality articulated in the third schema is both the result and presupposition, which is not to say foundation, of the first and second stages in a coevolutionary process. As a result of the nonlinearity of this complex structure, the first two schemata are already inscribed through the third before it explicitly emerges. While surely impossible within the framework of linear time, the third schema is nonetheless the after that is before the first and second types. To think after God is to think the after that is forever before us.

These schemata can be used for both synchronic and diachronic analysis. Synchronically, they can provide a taxonomic structure that makes

it possible to compare and contrast different symbolic networks within and among religious traditions. Though the variations are multiple, the patterns are similar. In many cases, beliefs and practices in different traditions turn out to be more similar to each other than they are to contrasting versions of their respective traditions. As I have suggested, Evangelical Protestantism and radical Islamism are closer to each other than either is to liberal forms of Christianity or Islam. The schemata can also be deployed diachronically to interpret the historical development of different traditions. By understanding how competing schemata function, it becomes possible to identify the most important factors contributing to cultural evolution and sociopolitical change.

The definition of religion and account of schemata developed in this chapter provide the interpretive framework for the argument developed in the following pages. My aim is both analytic and constructive: first, I seek to show how and why religion continues to play such an important role in the modern and postmodern world, and second, I attempt to provide a more adequate religious vision and ethical framework for negotiating the complexities and contradictions of life at the beginning of the twenty-first century.