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978-0-521-43806-3 - Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture

E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley

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Introduction

I. Declarations and debts

Some books make trouble. It is certainly the aim of this one to do so. Our pugnaciousness is born of frustration – frustration with the timidity that characterizes so many scholars' discussions of religious behavior and the contempt which characterizes many of the rest. (Thankfully, these two stances do not completely exhaust scholarship on the topic!) Both approaches are obscurantist, ultimately – the first because of its terror of theory and the second because of its restrictive view of theory. Whatever vices tarnish the position we advance, it exemplifies neither the torpor of the former nor the bile of the latter.

The first group's fear of theories about *anything* religious is the best illustration of its timidity. Awe in the presence of signals of transcendence motivates this group's methodological modesty. This is of a piece with the convictions of an even larger group of humanists and some social scientists who deny the possibility of fruitful scientific explanation of wide domains of human action and experience. Their ambitions extend no further than contorted taxonomies and thick descriptions (as if either can advance our knowledge very far without familiarity with the underlying theories that inform them!). In the end, the positions they espouse are profoundly anti-theoretical.

The second group is not anti-theoretical, and to that extent it is one step closer to the view we propound. However, this group's obsession with the successes of the physical sciences spawns an irrelevant preoccupation with the derogation of the truth content of religious beliefs. (Ironically, most issues concerning the explanation of religious behavior are completely orthogonal to the truth values of religious beliefs.) That obsession also instills an unduly narrow view of scientific methods and urges an exclusively physicalist metaphysics.

It is in virtue of this last characteristic that the first group typically labels the second as reductionist. Casting this complaint exclusively at the metaphysical level (in contrast to the methodological) is nothing but a smoke screen and an iniquitous diversion, since the truth of the theories these "reductionists" propose is primarily an empirical matter and not one to be decided a priori. We find their differing attitudes toward the possibility of formulating interesting theories about human behavior the more important way of differentiating between the two groups. In Chapter 1 we explore these issues in greater depth.

A third group of positions, which includes our own, believes in theory and

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believes in other than physical theory. This group is neither terrified by theory nor afraid to propose a richer vision of science generally and of scientific explanation in particular. Within this group arise the most heated methodological debates. (Such battles rarely emerge within the other two groups because in the first the method of science is a non-issue and in the second the method is largely settled.) In Chapter 2 we briefly discuss the three most interesting alternative positions to our own among those in this third group, namely, the intellectualist, symbolist, and structuralist approaches to religious materials. Unlike the members of the first two groups, each of these representatives of the third acknowledge the theoretical importance of cognitive issues. Moreover, each gives increasing attention to the methodological resources that theories about aspects of language suggest for theorizing about other cultural materials.

Our own position, which is *cognitivist* in orientation, endorses and extends both of these trends. This cognitivist position is indebted to the intellectualist, symbolist, and structuralist approaches, but we not only approve of their cognitivist tendencies and linguistic interests, we substantially amplify them in Chapters 3 through 6. We take inspiration from developments in the emerging cognitive sciences, including the linguistics, cognitive psychology, cognitive anthropology, and philosophy of psychology of the past decade or so. The remainder of this Introduction outlines and summarizes the major positions we defend.

This book operates at three different levels: the metatheoretical, the theoretical, and the substantive. We defend two crucial metatheoretical theses. The first concerns both the possibility of and the relationship between interpretive and explanatory endeavors. In short, we maintain that both interpretation and explanation are possible and that they can fruitfully interact to increase our knowledge. They are complementary not competitive. The failure of so many to recognize their productive interplay is largely a function of the preoccupations, especially of those scholars within the first two groups mentioned above, with the rigorous demands of a single model of scientific explanation, viz., the logical empiricists' deductive-nomological account. We argue (in Chapters 1 and 7) that the forms of scientific explanations are much more diverse than that single model implies.

In the study of religious phenomena (and in the history of religions particularly) research has leaned heavily in the direction of interpretive pursuits at the expense of explanatory theory. Our project aims to compensate for this imbalance. It is orthogonal to much previous research, since in this area scholars have done so little detailed theorizing about religious systems. Indeed, as we have indicated above, many have denied its very possibility! Obscurantism in spades.

The second metatheoretical thesis concerns what we call "the competence approach to theorizing" in the study of socio-cultural systems (McCauley 1986a). We argue in Chapter 4 that an important means for generating explanatory theories about many socio-cultural systems is to first formulate and test theories about the cognitive representations that an idealized participant's implicit knowledge about such systems suggests.

It is worth noting that we are not advocating this broadly cognitive approach to the study of all socio-cultural systems, but only that what we call "symbolic-cultural systems." Not only are symbolic-cultural systems responsible for organizing the behaviors of individuals and groups, but they are also socio-cultural systems (1) which involve symbolic phenomena; (2) which, unlike civil law, are

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usually not explicitly codified (and in those few cases when they are, they are usually not completely codified); (3) which are relatively restricted both in their use and in their transmission (hence, individual participants' idiosyncracies usually affect the fate of their forms hardly at all); (4) which, typically, are not explicitly taught; and (5) which, therefore, require that participants must have some form of *implicit* knowledge which their successful participation in these systems and which their judgments about the well-formedness of real and possible symbolic behaviors within the systems reveals. In addition to religious ritual systems, symbolic-cultural systems include such things as systems of etiquette, institutionalized ceremonies, and social games. (Concerning the latter, see, for example, Isbell and Fernandez 1977.)

Over the past three decades linguists and psychologists have developed numerous means for formulating and testing theories about cognitive systems. This is not especially easy, but it has proven easier than formulating and testing theories about socio-cultural systems. (Neither how to interpret nor how to test theories about the socio-cultural has ever been particularly clear.) Unlike research on socio-cultural entities, progress in psychology and linguistics has rendered theories about cognitive mechanisms and representations accessible to empirical (even experimental) test.

Because of the fundamentality of the competence approach to theorizing for all that follows, we will discuss it a bit here. Since the underlying structures of culture and society have consistently proved recalcitrant to the methods of social research based upon the strategies of the physical sciences, cognitivism approaches symbolic-cultural materials by studying the (usually) unconscious representations of cultural and social forms (and their underlying principles) which participants share. Participants' understandings of their cultures involve myriad unconscious assumptions which guide their action and conscious belief. These tacit assumptions are "what one sees *with*, but seldom what one *sees*" (Hutchins 1980, p. 12). Of course, the pressing question is how to theorize about such representations and how to marshal evidence in support of whatever theories emerge.

At the level of actual theorizing it has been a truism in cognitive anthropology that it is theories in recent linguistics that are most likely to serve as fruitful models for theorizing about symbolic-cultural materials. Of all symbolic-cultural systems languages have consistently proved the most amenable to theoretical analysis. (The three theoretical orientations to cultural symbolism we discuss in Chapter 2 all capitalize on this insight to some extent.)

Linguists gain information about the structure of language not only from direct observation of linguistic behavior but also from studying native speakers' intuitive judgments about various aspects of linguistic phenomena. The grammars linguists formulate on the basis of this information are their structural theories of the languages in question. Generative linguists then argue that native speakers must have some cognitive representation of these grammars (or something functionally equivalent) in order to exhibit the facility with their native languages that they do. It is this competence of an idealized speaker-listener which is the initial object of theoretical analysis.

The most direct way of empirically evaluating the resulting grammatical proposals turns on consulting native speakers' intuitive judgments about *further* linguistic

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materials. The means by which these theories can be defeated is to discover new linguistic strings which produce intuitive judgments in native speakers which are contrary to the pronouncements of the grammar under scrutiny. Because any natural language contains an indefinitely large number of possible sentences, the resources for testing grammars in this fashion are inexhaustible. Our own position and that of some recent cognitive anthropologists is that we can employ this general approach in the study of symbolic-cultural systems other than language.

Ironically, no work in recent linguistics has been as influential as that of Noam Chomsky, and no linguist has been any *less* sympathetic about the implications of his work for the study of *language* as a socio-cultural system. Chomsky has insisted on a thoroughly *psychological* interpretation of linguistic theories. Grammars reveal constraints on the form of natural languages which an innate, task specific, linguistic module in the mind-brain imposes. It is, according to Chomsky, primarily the innate principles and parameters of this module (what Chomsky has traditionally called “universal grammar”) that linguists (should) study. He argues that the prospects for theorizing about natural languages *as socio-cultural entities* are unpromising by comparison.

Whether they are sufficient to support his conclusions in the linguistic case or not, virtually all of the considerations which have motivated Chomsky’s strong claims about the task specificity and innateness of the psychological mechanism in question are *not* apparent in the case of most other symbolic-cultural systems (and certainly not in the case of religious ritual systems). Also, even though he has denied the relevance of his approach for the study of languages as socio-cultural systems, Chomsky has not denied that the competence approach to theorizing can be adapted for the study of other symbolic-cultural materials. Not only will we suggest that this can be done, but, after setting the stage in Chapters 1–4, we will, in Chapters 5 and 6, outline the general framework of such a theory for religious systems generally and religious ritual systems in particular.

We concur with Dan Sperber’s suggestions in *Rethinking Symbolism* (1975) that this type of broadly cognitive approach will prove useful in the study of symbolic materials. Nonetheless, even Sperber offers reasons (concerning both individual symbolism and idiosyncratic representations of cultural symbols) for expecting important limits on its ability to systematize symbolic materials. (It is primarily his concerns about these limits which keep Sperber’s discussion of the endogenous “symbolic mechanism” he posits in the final sections of *Rethinking Symbolism* at such a general level.)

In subsequent work Sperber seems to have relaxed his distinction between individual and cultural symbolism, generally treating instances of the former as examples of the latter. This is a mistake which only obscures a theoretically fruitful distinction. The factors which motivate Sperber’s caution about the extent to which a cognitive approach applies to symbolic materials, in fact, pertain prominently only in its application to individual symbolism. (We measure the prominence of pertinence here by the degree to which these factors interfere with systematic theorizing about the materials in question.) Plenty of space remains for detailed, systematic theories of other symbolic-cultural systems, even after considering the difficulties which the idiosyncracies of individuals’ representations of cultural

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symbols raise. From the apparent fact that the forms of other symbolic-cultural systems are not as *extensively* constrained as are those of natural languages, it does not follow that they are not as *rigorously* constrained when they are.

So, although we concur with Sperber's rejection of semiotic approaches to cultural symbolism, we reject his arguments for disanalogies between the linguistic and symbolic mechanisms based on such considerations. This is not to say there are no disanalogies, but rather that they are neither as pervasive nor as substantial as Sperber seems to think. Unlike Sperber we are *not* interested in *all* forms of symbolism. We agree with him that the diversity and flux of individual symbolism (for example, in works of literature) remain beyond the pale of present theoretical resources. A cognitive approach focusing on participants' competence with symbolic-cultural systems, however, may achieve a good deal more than even Sperber seems to allow.

We have already indicated that the specific type of symbolic-cultural system on which we shall *most closely* focus is the religious ritual system. The extensive constraints on much religious ritual form suggest that religious ritual systems will prove more immediately receptive to theoretical analysis than the rest of religion and, therefore, a useful means for gaining theoretical leverage on religious systems as a whole. Establishing these two claims exhausts this book's substantive aspirations.

We concentrate on "religious systems" rather than "religious traditions." For the purposes of theorizing we construe a religious system as a symbolic-cultural system of ritual acts accompanied by an extensive and largely shared conceptual scheme that includes culturally postulated superhuman agents. The former is a set of actions (including speech acts) of a relatively standard form which manipulate entities (and situations) in the world entertained within the conceptual scheme. That conceptual scheme can be exemplified in oral traditions, sacred texts, devotional materials, theological essays, etc. Our principal theoretical object is the shared knowledge about their religious systems (both the system of ritual acts and the accompanying conceptual scheme) of persons who are participants in those systems – on the assumption that an account of this shared system of knowledge will go a long way toward explaining many of the behaviors of participants that it inspires.

Many scholars (such as Goody 1961 and Spiro 1966) have argued that what is definitive of religion is commitment to the existence of culturally postulated superhuman beings. However, without exploring the theoretical underpinnings of definitions (and those theories' implications), debates about definitions never get very far. For definitions of religion that emphasize the role of culturally postulated superhuman beings, this book begins that exploration, since we maintain that what is unique to *religious* ritual systems is their inclusion of culturally postulated superhuman *agents* among the class of eligible participants.

This book is ultimately concerned with the explanation of a class of behaviors and the system of knowledge that informs it. (To repeat, the theoretical strategy we borrow from linguistics studies the latter in order to better understand the former.) This book neither interprets religious texts nor studies religious traditions. It is a corollary of the view we advance that neither texts nor traditions (in the sense of that term standardly associated with the most popular religions of the world) are necessary features of religious systems. Their interpretation

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and study may well contribute to a richer understanding of the body of phenomena in question, but both are ultimately incidental to its explanation. The insistence in the study of religion that texts and traditions are critical features of *full-fledged* religions has always served as a strategy for insulating the “great” world religions generally and Christianity in particular from the sort of analyses otherwise reserved for “primitives” – which is to say, all the rest of humanity. The general theoretical principles we advance apply to *all* religious rituals.

Critical to our theoretical approach is the fact that religious rituals are actions. As actions, their general structures are not at all extraordinary. Since the concepts of “agency” and “action” are so pivotal to human affairs, we hold that human beings are likely to have some reasonably ordered system for the (cognitive) representation of actions. Consequently, any theory of participants’ representations of their religious ritual actions should commence with some account of such a system for the representation of action, generally. In Chapter 5 we present a formal system that summarizes what we take to be the crucial components in the representation of action – though, we should add, what the system illustrates about action is, for the most part, quite commonplace.

Concerning this formal system it is crucial to keep three points in mind. First, although both it and our presentation of it resemble some work in generative linguistics, it does not represent a grammar (or even part of one) nor does it concern features of natural language. Consequently, although the positive analogies between natural language and other sorts of symbolic-cultural systems suggest that researchers employ similar theoretical strategies in their analysis, the resulting theories will differ fundamentally with respect to substantive detail.

Second, *unlike* Chomsky’s accounts of his theory, the overall theory we present does not turn on the manipulation of uninterpreted symbols on the model of recursive function theory. We will argue in Chapters 5 and 6 (where we analyze rituals from the Christian, Vedic, and Zulu religious systems) that certain semantic assumptions embedded in religious models will sometimes play a pivotal role in explaining participants’ representations of and intuitions about ritual form.

Finally, other than as a general account of the representation of action, this formal system serves exclusively as a means for making more precise *the universal principles of religious ritual that constitute the true heart of the theory*. These universal principles of religious ritual assess the formal system’s products (structural descriptions of religious actions) when it is employed in religious contexts – as signaled by a religious conceptual system’s penetration of the action representation system. These principles yield predictions about a range of features of a religious system’s rituals about which participants will likely have quite developed intuitive knowledge which can be elicited.

All of these universal principles of religious ritual are, ultimately, corollaries of the contention that it is the putative action of culturally postulated superhuman agents that is central to understanding the dynamics of religious ritual systems. (Hence, the principles apply to ritual actions in *any* religious system.) This is the most important respect in which this project explores and extends the sort of theoretical commitments that must underlie definitions of religion in terms of culturally postulated superhuman agents. A universal principle of those *religious* rituals that are least controversially classified as such is that they are presumed (by participants) to implicate superhuman agency indirectly at least.

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(What indirect implication of superhuman agents amounts to in a religious ritual is just one of the concepts these universal principles employ that the formal system will help to make more precise.) We maintain that *the most central religious rituals* require that the manifest agent have some ritual connection with the actions of an agent possessing such superhuman powers (as that class of agents is specified by the religion's conceptual scheme).

We do not pretend to establish the completeness of the theory that we outline. Still, we advance quite specific claims about the form and content of various types of religious rituals and about their relations both to one another and to the overall religious systems in which they figure. Moreover, these claims are eminently testable. Their test, however, may well require scholars to thoroughly rethink many existing ethnographic materials and to pursue subsequent ethnographies differently – asking somewhat different questions.

Anticipating the presentation of this theory in Chapter 5, we examine other scholars' efforts (based directly on the analogy between religion and language) to account for religious ritual in Chapter 3. Then we argue in Chapter 4 that, among symbolic-cultural systems, religious ritual systems in particular have certain peculiar features which only increase the probability that they will submit to systematic analysis in these sorts of terms. However, contrary to Frits Staal (1979a, 1979b, 1983, and 1984), who is the only other scholar (to our knowledge) who has offered an extended theoretical treatment of ritual inspired by generative linguistics, we argue that the commitments within the religion's conceptual system have important semantic implications which, in turn, have an impact on religious ritual *form*. (This is one reason why we confine our discussion to religious ritual systems rather than consider ritual systems generally.) Staal, by contrast, outlines a thoroughly formal theory of religious ritual that invokes the manipulation of uninterpreted symbols on the model of recursive function theory, which, as we indicated above, we eschew. We criticize Staal's (anti-)semantic thesis and his biological reductionism in Chapter 6.

We claim that, although much that is pivotal to participants' understanding of religious ritual *form* turns on general features common to all actions, religious rituals should be treated separately. They demand separate treatment because of the peculiar impact on the representation of (religious ritual) actions (1) of the sorts of metaphysical commitments all religions share as well as (2) of other features unique to the doxastic heritage of particular religions' conceptual schemes. Specifically, we suggest that participants' understanding of religious ritual systems must strike a compromise between accommodating the basic action structure that characterizes everyday views of action and their religious systems' commitments to the existence of superhuman *agents*.

We will save our defence of this position for later chapters. However, the important point about it is that it is *theoretically* motivated. Of course, groups such as Theravada Buddhists, Marxists, and secular humanists may prove troublesome for our approach, but such cases are hardly prototypical by anyone's lights! Furthermore, the theory we advance offers clear, theoretically inspired criteria for how to treat such cases. We maintain that participants' understanding of the role of superhuman agents is pivotal to their intuitive judgments about a wide variety of features of the religious ritual represented and about its relations to other rituals within the system as well as to the system overall. "Religions"

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without commitments to culturally postulated superhuman *agents* are (*at least*) extremely unlikely to have rich, highly constrained ritual systems. In fact, they are unlikely to have much ritual at all. Similarly, we argue that the less prominent the role superhuman agents have in a ritual, the more likely it is that variations and permutations will be tolerated and the less likely it is that the ritual will remain exclusive to an identifiable religious group.

In Chapter 6 we also argue that these considerations have important semantic consequences. Both Staal and Sperber entertain unduly restrictive views of the viable methods for the semantic analysis of natural languages. The failure of the methods they consider to explicate the meaning of religious ritual leads both to strong conclusions about its *meaninglessness*. In fact, though, the holistic approaches to semantics for the treatment of *symbolic systems* advanced in anthropology over the past twenty years are of a piece with similar proposals in philosophy and, more recently, in psychology and cognitive linguistics for dealing with the semantics of *natural language*. These approaches reveal the semantic wealth of all symbolic systems without reviving semioticians' preoccupations with codes that link symbols and their hidden meanings, which Sperber so vigorously and properly attacks.

To summarize then, we maintain at the *metatheoretical* level not only that explanations of religious behavior are possible, but also that the theories which motivate them can productively constrain interpretive efforts. We also argue that the competence approach to theorizing in linguistics will prove suggestive for the study of symbolic-cultural systems other than natural language. At the *theoretical* level we offer an outline of a theory of religious ritual systems which captures important constraints on their form and meaning. This theoretical proposal also makes numerous assumptions about religion generally. Consequently, *its success* should substantially constrain subsequent theorizing about religious systems. Our most important *substantive* theses are that the role of superhuman *agents* in religious rituals is the pivotal factor in determining a wide variety of properties which human participants attribute to those rituals and that religious ritual form is largely the product of a compromise between religions' commitments to superhuman agents and everyday views of human action.

II. Loans and pursuits of an interdisciplinary sort

Themes in this book are likely to interest scholars from at least five different disciplines, viz., philosophy, religion, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics. We owe much to the work of researchers from each of those fields. How we borrow from these disciplines is not always uncontroversial. Still, the issues in question reliably concern matters that are unsettled even *within* those disciplines.

Many scholars bear a skepticism about religious phenomena that is both deep and broad. Nowhere is this more prominent than among contemporary Anglo-American philosophers. Consider work in recent epistemology and philosophy of language.

Neither "metaphysical realism" (Putnam 1987) nor extensional projects in semantics are especially congenial to religious materials (or symbolic materials

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generally). The extent to which *reference* fails to capture meaning or to which correspondence fails to capture truth gauges the extent to which these positions falter in their treatment of the symbolic. Prominent alternative positions which discuss the character of rationality and so-called “radical translation” in terms of a principle of charity (e.g., Davidson 1984) just as consistently ignore the complexities that symbolic and religious claims introduce.

Some critics insist that progress in these areas requires more than mere adjustments to the traditional models of meaning and truth – for example, Lakoff and Johnson 1980 and Arbib and Hesse 1986. Whether these problems require the sweeping remedies these critics recommend is not our concern, but we are sympathetic with their diagnoses of the problems. Philosophers too often ignore the religious because it refuses to fit neatly into their analyses of rationality, meaning, and truth. Occasionally, researchers avoid what might otherwise seem to be obviously pertinent issues. That strategy often has heuristic value. However, frequently this is solely because preferred methods cannot render these problems tractable. (Ignoring problems is always easier than mastering alternative methods.) Refusing to address a problem will not make it go away. Nor does it eliminate the possibility that research of a different sort may advance our knowledge of these phenomena in the meantime.

The suggestion that religious systems involve the same sort of idealized models of the world and some of the same sort of speculations that scientists employ seems to indicate that they may differ only in degree from less controversially rational enterprises. (See Chapters 2 and 6 and Horton 1970.) This possibility seems less farfetched once the depth of the difficulties that surround the traditional accounts of meaning and truth (in terms of reference and correspondence respectively) have become more clear. Our own interest in such claims is *not* to defend either religions’ metaphysical commitments or religious practices but rather to clarify some of the semantic issues religious ritual raises.

Our unwillingness to debate metaphysics and our interest in systematically theorizing about religious behaviors may mollify some philosophers, but as we noted at the outset, it may get us into hot water with many scholars of religion. Long traditions in both theology and the phenomenology of religion insist, on what we would maintain is some ultimately theological ground or other, that religious experience is *sui generis*. (See Penner 1986a for a critical discussion.) Somehow, experiences of the holy wholly demarcate the methods by which they may be approached, if they permit analytic approach at all (Capps 1972)! Thus, the argument goes, applying the standard methods of empirical inquiry to the study of religious phenomena will offer an anemic and misleading view of the richness and diversity of religious experience.

It should be obvious that *we* balk when scholars of religion cite such considerations in order to attack even the *possibility* of formulating theories about religious behavior. Only its theological features distinguish religious experience from experiences and activities within other sorts of symbolic-cultural systems. To cite theology *in this context*, though, is simply to beg the question.

This fear of explanatory theories is a function of many factors. One is overestimating how much any one explanation can accomplish. Not even offering an explanation in terms of causal laws brings interpretive or *explanatory* questions to a close. A second consideration is related to the first. It involves overestimating

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how much explanatory activities can accomplish conjointly. It turns on the assumption that the notion of *complete* explanation makes sense in empirical research. *Except, perhaps, in theology*, though, complete explanations do not exist. (It is because many theologically oriented thinkers import this assumption into their understanding of science that programs of biological reductionism and cultural determinism so exercise them.) But where explanations are complete, productive inquiry ceases. We are skeptical about all forms of explanatory reductionism and explanatory exclusivism, but we repudiate anti-theoretic obscurantism with even greater vigor.

In no respect is this book an ethnography. What ethnographic work we discuss is primarily for illustrative purposes. As Sperber (1985) argues, theoretical advances in anthropology await neither more nor more complete ethnographies (though, theoretical progress may subsequently require *new sorts* of ethnographies). All data-gathering is theoretically inspired. The crucial issue is how aware of their theories data-gatherers are. Inquiry never fails to benefit from making new theories or making existing theories more explicit or making explicit theories more precise.

Theories guide interpretation. No datum is self-interpreting. The coincidence of theoretical distinctions with those within the sorts of pretheoretic intuitions and common sense which inform much ethnography is neither the only consideration nor the obviously most important consideration in the evaluation of a theory about a socio-cultural system. The history of science is largely a story of highly idealized theories overthrowing aspects of prevailing common sense (Churchland 1979). Furthermore, evidence exists of deep biases in human judgment which often contribute to the persistence of common-sense commitments and “intuitive” theories even when they are completely inconsistent with our best systematic theories in some domain (McCloskey 1983). Nor are these biases confined to physical topics. Research in cognitive psychology on inference and judgment reveals that subjects’ performances frequently rely on biased, fallible heuristics and that in many areas they consistently proceed counter-normatively, even when they have a long-standing acquaintance with the best normative theories available in some domain (Tweney et al. 1981 and Kahneman et al. 1982). In addition, work in social cognition indicates that frequently subjects either discount clearly relevant information or attend to obviously irrelevant information in many situations (Nisbett and Ross 1980). Surely, one moral of these sorts of findings is that the more explicit our theories are the better.

Although psychologists arguably have a proprietary interest in talk about *cognition*, very little usually turns on the ownership of terms. Both Sperber’s work (1975) and that of other cognitive anthropologists offers a precedent for employing cognitive talk. (See, for example, Holland and Quinn 1987 or Hutchins 1980.) Sperber argues, correctly we believe, that progress in anthropology awaits theories that formulate universal principles taken to underlie both the possible *variability* of particular cultural forms and participants’ tacit knowledge of the pertinent symbolic-cultural systems. (See also Turner 1967, p. 138.) He maintains that progress not only in psychology but also in cultural anthropology turns fundamentally upon ascertaining more about the structure of the human mind. Consequently, developments in these fields should illuminate one another (Sperber 1985, pp. 3, 76).