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Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson
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Bringing Ritual to Mind

Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms

Bringing Ritual to Mind explores the cognitive and psychological foundations of religious ritual systems. Participants must recall their rituals well enough to ensure a sense of continuity across performances, and those rituals must motivate them to transmit and re-perform them. Most religious rituals the world over exploit either high performance frequency or extraordinary emotional stimulation (but not both) to enhance their recollection; the availability of literacy has little impact on this. But why do some rituals exploit the first of these variables while others exploit the second? McCauley and Lawson advance the ritual form hypothesis, arguing that participants' cognitive representations of ritual form explain why. Reviewing evidence from cognitive, developmental and social psychology, cultural anthropology, and the history of religions, they utilize dynamical systems tools to explain the recurrent evolutionary trajectories religions exhibit.

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Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms

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This book is dedicated to
Drindee McCauley and Ruth Lawson
whose insight, courage, love, and support
constantly enrich our lives and give them balance

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Preface

Slightly more than a decade ago we published a book, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, in which we launched the cognitive science of religion. For all of the froth that accompanies encounters between the humanities and the cognitive sciences on university campuses, everyone knows that the best work in each area regularly looks to the other for inspiration and correction. Our goal is not to supplant traditional work in religious studies but to supplement it. If our work seems tilted too far toward the scientific, it is only because we aim to redress an imbalance – an imbalance in strategy and approach that favors the particular over the general, the idiosyncratic over the systematic, and the interpretive over the explanatory (as if we could make sense of either item in each pair in isolation from the other). What we are out to do is to help bring an end to the defensive pronouncements of humanists and, especially, of scholars of religion concerning what the sciences can never address productively. Who knows what the sciences can or cannot address productively? Only time and a great deal of hard work will tell.

We should emphasize that this aspiration is not born of any undue confidence about the truth of the proposals we advance. (What we take up are, after all, *empirical* matters.) What should be most striking are the tremendous difficulties connected with even articulating testable theories in these domains, let alone testing them. Instead of disdainful proclamations discouraging such initiatives, scholars of religion should welcome analyses that aim to increase simultaneously theoretical precision and empirical responsibility. Our principal goal in this book is simply to do a little more of that hard work.

We continue our focus on ritual. (For us, one of the most thrilling developments over the past decade has been to learn that others, e.g., Pascal Boyer, 1994 and 2001, are hard at work on supplying cognitive theories about other aspects of religious thought and practice.) Adopting a theoretical strategy prominent in linguistics, in *Rethinking Religion* we presented a theory of participants' religious ritual *competence*, i.e., a theory of their tacit knowledge about their religious ritual systems. We maintain that

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this competence depends upon perfectly ordinary cognitive machinery that humans possess which is dedicated to the representation of agents and actions generally, not just religious ritual agents and actions. The true heart of the theory resides in two principles (the Principle of Superhuman Agency and the Principle of Superhuman Immediacy) that jointly highlight participants' presumptions about the contributions of culturally postulated superhuman agents to their ritual actions. Briefly, our claim is that the character of those presumptions is the most important factor in participants' overall understanding of their rituals' forms and that religious ritual form is the pivotal variable determining a host of features any religious ritual possesses. We summarize all of the theory's decisive commitments in the second half of chapter 1.

The critical test of any theory's sturdiness is its ability to stand up to the empirical evidence. This is our goal in this book. This is an inherently interdisciplinary undertaking. Many disciplines address human thought and conduct. Relevant evidence, therefore, can arise from numerous quarters. We shall appeal extensively (especially in chapter 2) to experimental research in cognitive psychology. We shall refer at various points to experimental findings from developmental psychology, social psychology, and neuropsychology too. We shall also make abundant use of materials from cultural anthropology and religious studies.

When explicating our theory we shall usually rely on illustrations from religious systems we suspect are likely to be familiar to the largest pluralities of our readers. So, we make numerous incidental references to the ritual practices of the major Western religions – Christianity especially but also occasionally Judaism and Islam. We also make occasional incidental references to rituals with which one or both of us are familiar from religions of Africa and India. One important piece of evidence bearing on one of our theory's claims concerns an ancient Vedic ritual.

Our two focal cases, however, arise out of Melanesia. There are two reasons for this. First, we did not discuss Melanesian materials at all in *Rethinking Religion*. Second, the two ethnographies in question, viz., Fredrik Barth's *Ritual and Knowledge Among the Baktaman of New Guinea* and Harvey Whitehouse's *Inside the Cult*, both concentrate on the connections between ritual, emotion, and memory, which are the central topics we shall address.

More than eight years ago when we first formulated the ideas that fill this book, Pascal Boyer, whom we had met a year or two before, informed us that an anthropologist friend of his in Britain, Harvey Whitehouse, had been working on similar issues. After reading Harvey's early papers, especially "Memorable Religions: Transmission, Codification and Change in Divergent Melanesian Contexts" (Whitehouse, 1992), we began to fear that perhaps we had been scooped. Further reading of his work, however,

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made it clear to us that our theories differed and often made incompatible predictions. We subsequently met Harvey at a conference at Cambridge University in December 1993. Hearing some of the story that now constitutes his stirring and insightful ethnography, *Inside the Cult*, we were struck by our theory's ability to predict most of the rest of the story, which Harvey corroborated informally in conversation. The appearance of that book in 1995 provided us with the opportunity to consider Harvey's views and evidence at much greater length. Obviously, Harvey's ethnography and his newest synthetic proposals in his second book, *Arguments and Icons*, have been an influence and an inspiration.

At about the same time we received a typescript of a paper from a Cornell University graduate student in experimental psychology, Justin Barrett. Justin had co-authored the paper with Frank Keil, a friend in whose work we had had a longstanding interest. That groundbreaking paper, "Conceptualizing a Non-natural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts" (Barrett and Keil, 1996), taught us many things, but one of the most important was that there were bona fide experimental *cognitive* psychologists whose *primary* interest was in the cognitive foundations of religion. Ever since, Justin has been relentlessly devising and performing clever experiments – so characteristic of work in his discipline – designed to test various consequences of our, Harvey's, and Pascal's theories, among others. From the outset he has recognized, along with Pascal, the fundamental importance of conducting these experiments with populations in different cultures. He has already undertaken work in North America, Europe, India, and Africa. He is pursuing not just an experimental cognitive psychology of religion but a *cross-cultural* experimental cognitive psychology of religion. In just a few short years the volume, power, and insight of Justin's work has already identified him as a leading contributor to this new field.

Over those same years what has emerged is a nearly continuous discussion in regular email exchanges, punctuated by periodic face-to-face conclaves with Pascal, Harvey, Justin, and others in which we have pondered many of the issues we discuss in this book and a great deal more. We have benefited from these exchanges in countless ways.

Justin has brought to our discussions the tough-mindedness of an experimental scientist, his extensive knowledge of work in experimental psychology (cognitive, social, and developmental), and a wry sense of humor. Justin suggested that we use the figures that we have employed in this book, and he has repeatedly helped us to state with precision the differences and connections between our and Harvey's theories.

Pascal first suggested to us that we write this book. Ever faithful, he has read and reread drafts of every chapter, providing us with dozens of helpful comments. He has made excellent suggestions for streamlining

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some of our technical terminology. His suggestions were decisive in how we organized the materials at the beginning of chapter 2. He has done everything from aiding us in clarifying our account of cultural transmission to risking influenza in encouraging us in our work on this book.

Other friends, both personal and institutional, have provided us with considerable aid and comfort. We are grateful to the various professional societies where we have presented parts of this book over the years, especially the North American Association for the Study of Religion, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and the International Association for the History of Religions. We also wish to thank the American Academy of Religion for a collaborative research grant that enabled our computers to communicate along the longitudinal axes of the eastern half of the United States. In the academic year of 1998–1999 Emory College and the Massee-Martin/National Endowment for the Humanities fund at Emory University jointly provided Robert McCauley with a year's research leave during which most of this book was written. He wishes to express his profound gratitude for this support.

Earlier versions of parts of chapters 1, 2, and 4 have appeared elsewhere (Lawson and McCauley, forthcoming, McCauley, 1999, and McCauley, 2001).

So many people have influenced our thought that it would be impossible to name each and every one. We are grateful to audiences at Washington University, the University of Turku, the University of Marburg, the University of Bonn, the Free University of Berlin, the University of Vermont, Georgia State University, the University of Waterloo, and the Departments of Psychology and Anthropology at Emory University for their comments and criticisms of various presentations that were connected with this project.

We are exceedingly grateful to more than a score of individuals who have helped us along the way. We wish to thank Adele Abrahamsen, Veiko Anttonen, Larry Barsalou, Fredrik Barth, Bill Bechtel, Robyn Fivush, Marshall Gregory, Stewart Guthrie, Michael Houseman, Mark Johnson, Ziva Kunda, Brian Malley, Luther Martin, Ulric Neisser, Charles Nuckolls, Ilkka Pyysiainen, Mark Risjord, Benson Saler, Brigitte Schoen, Tom Sjoblom, Paulo Sousa, Dan Sperber, Paul Thagard, Christian von Somm, and Eugene Winograd for comments, encouragement, and support at various stages.

Producing a book is no simple task. We are indebted to Ellen McCauley and Mark Risjord for valuable technical suggestions in the creation of many of the figures in this book and to Jamie Martin for further refinements in their designs as well as for their production. We are grateful for a grant from the Quadrangle Fund for Advanced Research at Emory

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University to cover the costs of that production. We also wish to express our appreciation to Jessica Kuper and Peter Ducker at Cambridge University Press for their aid and advice and to Carol Fellingham Webb for her copy-editing. Thanks, too, go to David Strand for his assistance with a variety of chores and to Brian Lee for his photograph of the rock art.

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We are fortunate and grateful to have such fine friends and colleagues. We are also fortunate and grateful to have the unending love and support of our wives, Drindee and Ruth, and of our daughters, Ellen and Sonya and Jennifer, who, even in the face of profound challenges in their own lives, have never faltered in their concern for the success of our projects.

We are lucky men, indeed.

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