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RADICAL INTERPRETATION IN RELIGION

This landmark interdisciplinary volume presents new methodological options for the study of religion in the twenty-first century. Ten distinguished scholars offer radical interpretations of religious belief and language from a variety of perspectives: anthropology of religion, ritual studies, cognitive psychology, semantics, post-analytic philosophy, history of religions, and philosophy of religion. For the first time, a collection of original essays explores the significance of Donald Davidson's "radical interpretation," Robert Brandom's "inferentialism," and Richard Rorty's pragmatism for issues in the study of religion. Related topics include cultural variations in belief from Madagascar to China, experimental research from cognitive science, and the semantics of myth, metaphor, mana, and manna. *Radical Interpretation in Religion* will be of interest to both general readers and specialists seeking a deeper understanding of new directions in the study of religion.

NANCY K. FRANKENBERRY is John Phillips Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA. She is the author of *Religion and Radical Empiricism* (1987), and co-editor of *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief* (1999) and *Interpreting Neville* (1999).

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EDITED BY
NANCY K. FRANKENBERRY
Dartmouth College, New Hampshire



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*This book is dedicated to Hans H. Penner,
in gratitude for his work in the
study of religion*

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HANS H. PENNER retired in 2001 as the Kelsey Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College. His areas of expertise include the history of religions, with special interest in the religions of India, as well as methodological and theoretical questions in the academic study of religion. He is the author of many articles on topics in the study of religion, as well as *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion*. He is the editor of *Teaching Levi-Strauss* and co-editor of *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief*.

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for Autonomy and Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, along with numerous papers on pragmatism, religion in America, and religious ethics. His forthcoming book is tentatively entitled *Democracy and Tradition*.

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Preface

To many investigators, the phenomenon of religion resembles a petri dish brimming with exotic specimens and puzzling data. Viewed under the microscope, it teems with strange cultures. Even to a trained eye, the study of religion – its structure, persistence, and meaning – poses acute interpretative challenges. Until recently, students of religion usually regarded their work as a matter of uncovering beliefs and worldviews that issue in religious behavior. Interpretation followed representationalist models, of one kind or another, that presumed realist correspondences between language and reality. Currently, however, both the category of “belief” and the act of “interpretation” are receiving critical attention by scholars in such areas as anthropology of religion, ritual studies, cognitive psychology, semantics, post-analytic philosophy, history of religions, and philosophy of religion. *Radical Interpretation in Religion* consists of original chapters by ten prominent authors in these fields who propose a variety of new ways of interpreting believers.

As a collection, these studies focus primarily on religion as a form of linguistic behavior. In Part I, Terry Godlove, Jeffrey Stout, Richard Rorty, and Wayne Proudfoot assess the pragmatics of radical interpretation in religion in light of recent developments in Anglo-American philosophy of language. The chapters in Part II by Catherine Bell, Thomas Lawson, and Maurice Bloch consider related questions of belief and interpretation in the context of cultural variations from Madagascar to China and experimental research from cognitive science. In Part III, Hans Penner, Nancy Frankenberry, and Jonathan Z. Smith explore the semantics of myth, metaphor, “mana” and “manna.”

These interpretations are radical in the broad sense and the narrow sense. In the broad sense, each chapter critiques root assumptions in the study of religion or presents a fundamental thesis or reinterpretation. The theoretical scope thus ranges over issues of belief, meaning, truth, interpretation, explanation, and comparison, and focuses on very basic

ways religion has been thought about in the modern and late-modern West. In the narrower sense of radical interpretation, these chapters can be read in light of the philosopher Donald Davidson's theory of "radical interpretation" which concerns the conditions of correct attribution of beliefs and other propositional attitudes. Some chapters present data that pose problems for Davidson's theory, or express doubts about the utility of "belief" as an ethnological or analytic category; other essays illustrate that theory at work in the study of religion, or suggest a specific application of it; still others trace a dialectic beyond Davidsonian semantics to Robert Brandom's inferentialism and Richard Rorty's pragmatism.

Despite the variety of viewpoints and subject matter, all of the authors share at least three things. First, they move away from older models of representation and symbolic expression to holistic ways of thinking about the interrelations of language, meaning, beliefs, desires, and action. If beliefs have inferential relations to other beliefs, an interpreter can ascribe a single belief to a person only against the background of a very large number of other beliefs. On this view, the meaning of a sentence depends on the meaning of other sentences in the semantic structure of a language as a whole. Some authors would even generalize this principle to religions as such, understood as holistic systems in which, to take one example, Hindu caste has meaning only in relation to Buddhist renouncer/ascetic. Second, they stand in a critical tradition that explains religion in entirely naturalist terms, rather than on supernatural or faith-based premises. For the most part, these authors are and have been long-standing critics of the approach to the study of religion that begins and ends with cosmology and the category of "The Sacred." Far from treating religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon, they assume that whatever explains how language and minds work generally explains how religious language and religious minds work. Third, all recognize that, to be descriptively adequate, a definition of religion must include "superhuman agent" or one of its variants as characteristic of what makes ritual action or belief specifically "religious" for believers and interpreters alike. All the authors thus adopt an externalist view of the subject matter and do not offer much to please religious realists or those who hanker after Radical Orthodoxy in theology.

In place of theological and metaphysical preoccupations, then, these chapters offer pragmatic, semantic, or cognitive accounts. In theory and in method, *Radical Interpretation in Religion* represents new departures for thinking about religion, myth, and ritual, but makes no pretense to comprehensiveness or uniformity, still less to a methodology that would rule

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the increasingly multidisciplinary and multicultural study of religion. It is intended for readers who are seeking a more critical analysis of the current study of religion, rather than of the contemporary significance of “religion.” In brief introductions to the three parts of this book, I have tried to indicate the scope of each author’s contributions to an understanding of religion’s place in culture, or to particular problems in the study of religion. Readers interested in further work by these authors are invited to consult the Select bibliography at the end of this book.

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I would like to thank all the contributors not only for writing such stimulating and original chapters, but also for being consistently gracious and cooperative with this project. I am especially grateful to Jeff Stout for excellent suggestions along the way and only sorry I could not take all of his advice.

Thanks are owed to Gail Vernazza for preparation of the manuscript; to Sandy Curtis and Stephanie Nelson for office assistance; to Laura and Drew Hinman for overseeing the weekend at the Minary Center; to Tom West for giving me helpful advice; and to Kevin Taylor at Cambridge University Press for his receptivity to the idea of this book. Gillian Maude was astute in her editing of the manuscript, and Rick Furtak was meticulous in his preparation of the index.

Finally, this book is for Hans. He has been a standard-bearer for the importance of the academic study of religion throughout four decades in which various fideisms and passing gurus have flourished. Although he would be the last to allow that any one of us here has “got it right,” all the chapters in this volume address questions that have been central to his career.