



Routledge Studies in Religion

AN ETHOLOGY OF RELIGION AND ART

BELIEF AS BEHAVIOR

Bryan Rennie



An Ethology of Religion and Art

Drawing from the ethology of art and the cognitive science of religion this book proposes an improved understanding of both art and religion as behaviors developed in the process of human evolution. Looking at both art and religion as closely related, but not identical, a more coherent definition of religion can be formed that avoids pitfalls such as the Eurocentric characterization of religion as belief or the dismissal of the category as nothing more than false belief or the product of scholarly invention.

The book integrates highly relevant insights from the ethology and anthropology of art, particularly the identification of “the special” by Ellen Dissanayake and art as agency by Alfred Gell, with insights from Ann Taves, among others, who similarly identified “specialness” as characteristic of religion. It integrates these insights into a useful and accurate understanding and explanation of the relationship of art and religion and of religion as a human behavior. This in turn is used to suggest how art can contribute to the development and maintenance of religions.

The innovative combination of art, science and religion in this book makes it a vital resource for scholars of Religion and the Arts, Aesthetics, Religious Studies, Religion and Science and Religious Anthropology.

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An Ethology of Religion and Art

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Belief as Behavior

Bryan Rennie

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I would like to acknowledge the invaluable support and encouragement that I received from Jeff Kripal, Norman Girardot, and Ann Taves. I hope that the inevitable errors in this book, which are entirely my own responsibility, are not a disappointment to them. My colleague and neighbor, Russ Martin, kept me going when my own faith in this project threatened to fail me.

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1 General introduction¹

Good sense is the most evenly shared thing in the world, for each of us thinks he is so well endowed with it that even those who are the hardest to please in other respects are not in the habit of wanting more than they have.

(Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 27)

Religion as a content area rivals good sense as a faculty. Even those who are the hardest to please in other respects are not in the habit of wanting to know more than we already know about it, but readily come to firm conclusions and set behaviors concerning religion ... and thereby hangs a tale. The initial thesis of this work is simple enough. It is that the history and philosophy of religion and the history and philosophy of art are critically in need of integration and mutual consideration. This is not to state that religion and art are “the same thing” (or “things” at all). Clearly, they are not. They are two discrete abstract nouns, and there are sustainable distinctions to be made between them. There can be art objects and events that are unconnected with institutional religion, and there may be religious activities that lack all artistry. On the other hand, the objects and activities of the material culture to which these two abstract nouns refer, both past and present, are so inextricably interconnected that it is imperative to our understanding of each that we cease the futile and damaging attempt to tell their stories as if they were entirely distinct. Since the Renaissance, and particularly since the Protestant Reformation, the insistence in the modern, Western, European, Christian, or post-Christian world on conceiving religion and art as fundamentally dissimilar has been carried forward with remarkable tenacity. However, with the recent and increasing emphasis on the material culture of religion and with cognitive and evolutionary insights into both religion and art (and with the introduction of some long-overdue humility and self-awareness in the West), it is increasingly apparent that this distinction and the conceptions of art and religion associated with it are fatally flawed. *An Ethology of Religion and Art: Beauty, Belief, and Behavior* clarifies and justifies these claims and draws out some of their implications and entailments, resulting in an understanding of art and religion and their relationship that is detailed, accurate, and, I hope, extremely useful.

What's the problem?

I first started thinking seriously about the problematic relationship of religion and art when I began teaching an undergraduate course of that name in 2005. Not that I hadn't thought about it before—I had thought about it enough to know that it worried me. Religion alone is a deeply problematic concept and the many attempts to define it have never proven satisfactory. Combined with the equally ill-defined concept of art it constitutes a “two-body” problem in which the behavior of one imprecise variable is unpredictably influenced by the dynamics of another that is equally elusive. It is common knowledge that religion and art are inextricably bound up with one another so as to be almost inseparable prior to the Renaissance and across the world. A huge proportion of everything that is identified as “art,” culturally from Angkor Wat to the Ziggurats, and chronologically from Göbekli Tepe to the Crystal Cathedral, has overtly religious themes. As Barbara DeConcini, one-time president of the American Academy of Religion, put it:

there are important connections between religion and art: both are oriented toward meaning, and both deal in universal human values—both are fundamental to being human. What is more, religion and art share remarkably similar discourses. Each works primarily through story, image, symbol and performance.

(1991, 2)

The German theologian, philosopher, and biblical scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) insisted in 1799 that “religion and art stand beside one another like to friendly souls whose inner affinity, whether or not they equally surmise it, is nevertheless still unknown to them” (1958, 158). In the 19th century, the Danish philosopher and author Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) felt that art had only recently achieved integrity and autonomy from religion. He also believed that art had gone too far and was beginning to become a substitute for religion. Sacred and profane inspiration were for him fundamentally incomparable, and he thought that if the Christian tradition were seen as an aesthetic phenomenon, then it was in danger of being explained away (1940). In *The Sacred Shrine: A Study of the Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church* (1912) the Finnish philosopher Yrjö Hirn (1870–1952) argued that the early equivalents of religion and art existed seamlessly blended together in the earliest stages of their development. In *Sacred and Profane Beauty (Vom Heiligen in der Kunst*, 1957), the Dutch phenomenologist of religion Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1890–1950) argued that the arts and religion began in a state of original unity, each art, and religion itself, only later achieving its own integrity and autonomy (2006). More recently, Marcia Brennan, in a fascinating work, *Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum* (2010), has indicated the continuing, if concealed, consanguinity of art and religion by arguing that art museums remain places of mystical experience, suggesting that even

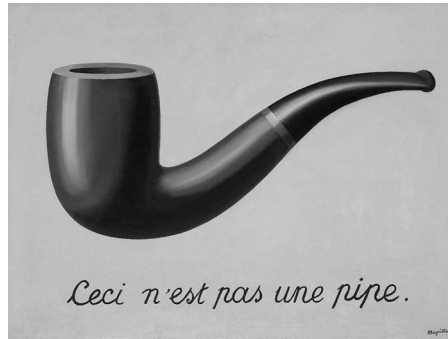


Figure 1.1 *La Trahison des Images* by René Magritte (1928–1929). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital Image © [2019] Museum Associates/LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY. © ARS, NY, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, USA.

modern art never really separated itself from the complex mystical traditions that preceded it.

The Biblical Second Commandment orders that

you shall not make for yourself a graven image, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

(Exodus 20.1–17)

This has often been taken as driving a wedge between art and religion, making them undeniably distinct. Yet, as David and Linda Altshuler convincingly point out (1984), early Jewish synagogues were by no means bereft of art. Their conclusion is that the Commandment is an organic unity composed of two halves. It is not a prohibition of art *per se*, but a prohibition of “bowing down and worshipping” our own representations—a warning, I would argue, against “the treachery of images”—that is, against mistaking the representation for the thing represented.

It would be a mistake to assume that such a caveat would be too sophisticated for early Hebrew authors. They were equally, if differently, sophisticated as any anatomically modern humans. David Lewis-Williams, a scholar of both the contemporary San art of South Africa and Paleolithic cave painting, warns us that even the artists of Paleolithic images may have had no intention to represent physical, empirical items but specifically to represent “spirit beings” (2002, 194). While the visions were real *as visions*, they were not real in the sense of representing “a real bison,” that is, a physical, flesh and blood being. If Paleolithic artists could exercise such sophistication, it is no stretch of the

imagination to argue that the writers of the Second Commandment did, too. The essence of the idolatry they sought to avoid is taking the representation to be the thing it represents, treating the pointing finger as the moon.

How, then, *are* art and religion related? As one walks into the bizarrely folded and convoluted edifice that has grown up on the foundation that is the confluence of religion and art (I can't help but think of the edifice as a Frank Gehry marvel), the entrance is littered with crumpled handbills. Pick them up, unfold them, smooth out the creases, and they turn out to be warnings: John Dixon counsels us that "[n]early every attempt that has been made to incorporate art into the study of religion or to account for art theologically has to some degree done violence to one or the other, either by distortion or impoverishment" (1983, 78). David Chidester says that

as soon as we say, "Religion and Aesthetics" we are caught in a problem. It would seem that we are bringing together two relatively separate and independent entities: two separate areas of human activity, two separate subject fields ... into some arbitrary juxtaposition.

(1983, 55)

James Elkins has said, "I can't think of a subject that is harder to get right, more challenging to speak about in a way that will be acceptable to the many viewpoints people bring to bear" (2004, ix), and Elkins observes that, for some people, the word "religion" can no longer be associated with the ideas of art. "Talk about art and talk about religion have become alienated one from the other, and it would be artificial and misguided to bring them together" (x). Yet there is, arguably, a "field" of the study of religion and art. In 1991 DeConcini told us that "Religion and art has been a 'field' in the sense that one can study it in graduate school and find positions teaching it in colleges only since the 1950s" (1991, 323), but 13 years later, David Morgan was still asking, "is there, in fact, a history of art and religion *as a field of study*? ... has 'art and religion' been a discreet and circumspect topic of enquiry?" He concludes that it is "presumptuous" to see the study of art and religion as a distinct field (2004, 17).

Trying to teach the subject(s) seemed a nightmare of haunting, ill-defined behemoths lurking just out of sight, eternally vanishing into the mists of ignorance. When I first taught the course, I took Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, in which the Bellman, who captained the hunt, had a map that was "a perfect and absolute blank," as the *leitmotiv*. In Carroll's immortal words:

... beware of the day,
If your Snark be a Boojum! For then
You will softly and suddenly vanish away,
And never be met with again!

... and each Snark threatened to be a Boojum. The whole complex threatened to be so far from anything that could be dealt with reliably and rationally, especially by a single individual, that it seemed inevitably to lead to such

pretentious nonsense that one's every opinion could evaporate (or sublime) before the righteous scorn of one's colleagues. I soldiered on, buoyed up by the indefatigable enthusiasm of my students and their apparently unshakable conviction that I knew what I was talking about. The best single book I could find on the subject, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's anthology, *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, was first published in 1984 and contains articles that, albeit extremely valuable, date from the 1930s and 1940s and are thus ignorant of developments that are more recent. It is also a graduate-level text. I supported my students as best I could and helped them through the readings and provided as many more as I could find that might enlighten them (and me) concerning the relationship of religion and art. Apostolos-Cappadona's book is immensely helpful as an introduction to the problem, but it raises more questions than it answers, being full of suggestive, somewhat breathless, indications that art in religion enables "the expression of the inexpressible" and "vision of the invisible." It is almost universally agreed that art permits the artist to express and the audience to apprehend that which is otherwise inexpressible and beyond apprehension. There are also obvious implications as to the nature of the invisible that is thus revealed. It is not simply that invisible agents such as gods and spirits become available to experience through the media of sculpture or painting or as elements of narrative (although this is far from unimportant). It is the universal, the infinite, "the undifferentiated continuum," the transcendent, the *structure* of reality, ultimate reality, or the truly real, that is somehow made available to the bodily senses. Thomas Franklin O'Meara claims that "art suggests a mode of subjectivity that not only rejects the technocracy of words but which unleashes, bestows, and discloses the more of Presence" (206). O'Meara quotes the German Idealist philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) as saying that "Beauty is the infinite presented in the finite" (1978, 208). Similar statements occur throughout the volume: according to the sculptor, Stephen De Staebler, "[i]f you strip away all the doctrines and dogmas, religion becomes a very precarious relationship between a frail and finite reality and a sense of all-present infinite reality" (26). F. S. C. Northrop calls this

apprehending the undifferentiated continuum in and through the immediately apprehended differentiated continuum ... this mode of knowing not only apprehends the immediately sensed world of "differentiated" objects and feelings, but—in and with that—the underlying "undifferentiated," sacred unity that empowers and is the ground for everything. (1946, 315–358, 394–404, as quoted by Richard Pilgrim 1984, 138)

O'Meara also says that

the aesthetic illustrates human theological interpretation of divine revelation. The aesthetic modality is a basic fact of experience. Aesthetics can describe religion, revelation, faith, and thinking about faith with

the strength and clarity equal to the categorical style...[Aesthetics] does not presume that theology or life is mainly word, syllogism, myth, or symbol.

(205)

In the same volume, Paul Tillich talks of “the deceptive character of the surface of everything we encounter which drives one to discover what is below the surface. ... The truly real which cannot deceive us... Ultimate reality is expressed in artistic forms” (220). Effective art reveals “the breathing of the universal in the particular,” according to the catalog of the exhibition “Bernard Leach: 50 years a Potter” (Leach 1961, 88 quoted by Cecilia Davis Cunningham, 9). “The transcendent appears through art,” according to Langdon Gilkey (1984, 189). O’Meara says that for Schelling art is “a realization of absolute consciousness. It is an access to the structure of reality—past, present, and future. Art, like philosophy, is revelation” (1978, 209–210).

But what on earth does all this *mean*? Isn’t it just sublime nonsense? Does it express anything other than the writers’ love of art? How can one *explain* it? Is the Snark a Boojum or not? Clearly, art is being assumed to perform what is usually thought of as the central function of religion—to reveal the otherwise unknown nature of the “really real,” the sacred, the invisible world or cosmic order, which determines the ultimate value of our behavior. The present volume proposes to explain how it does so.

I initially picked up an Ariadne’s thread provided by phrases such as Paul Ricoeur’s “disclosure of new modes of being, of new forms of life, gives to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself” (quoted in DeConcini 1991, 325) and John Dixon’s “the worshipper returns to his own circumstances not so much better informed about the nature of the common life as prepared to see the ordinariness of things radiant with the faith” (1984, 288). Apostolos-Cappadona has also edited an anthology of articles by historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, on the subject of religion and art (Eliade, 1986), and such phrases are reminiscent of Eliade who, in his discussion of religious symbols, had said that symbols allow people to “become conscious” of alternative modalities of the real. They “disclose to us a perspective from whence things appear different.” They “make the immediate reality ‘shine’” (1986, 6). Eliade is often accused (among other things) of being a “closet theologian,” and an obfuscatory mystic who simplistically accepts the reality of transcendental agencies and whose understanding of religion is, therefore, incoherent (McCutcheon 2001). I do not believe this to be the case, as I will explain in detail in Chapter 6, but the problem remains: how can one make coherent sense of such claims? How *are* religion and art related?

Elkins points out that “there is almost no modern religious art in museums or in books and art history” (ix) and it is, perhaps, from the apparent disappearance of religion from modern art that we should take some clues. While I agree that talk about art and talk about religion have become alienated from one another, I disagree strongly that “it would be artificial and misguided

to bring them together” (Elkins, x). It is telling that, while Elkins recognizes that he accepts a very particular definition of art for a very particular reason—“in order to avoid having to say what art should be about, or even what it has been about.” He defines art as “whatever is exhibited in galleries in major cities, bought by museums of contemporary art, shown in bienales and the Documenta, and written about in periodicals such as *Artforum*, *October*, *Flash Art*, *Parkett* or *Tema Celeste*” (1). This is what is often termed “the institutional definition of art.” Ellen Dissanayake and the ethologists of art who are principal contributors to my argument fundamentally reject it. While such a definition sufficed for Elkins’ particular purpose in that volume, it has very particular consequences. This institutional definition of art has its own virtues and can be, and often is, invoked as an ostensive definition of the class (I will say more about the nature and types of definition in a following chapter), it simply *assumes* the fundamental discontinuity of art and religion and thus provides no possible response to the questions raised by most of the aforementioned authors concerning the indisputable *connections* between the two. Religion and art may have *become* alienated, but they had some earlier relation, even in the modern West, and they still do in much of the world as they did throughout history. It is necessary and extremely instructive to consider that relationship.

Tracing the relation of religion and art throughout human history may be like trying to trace the trajectory of two sparks through an ongoing explosion. I was much encouraged while struggling to understand the art of divination in the *Yijing* when I came across Richard Smith’s assertion that “an impossible task is nonetheless worth undertaking if the topic is interesting enough” (2008, xii). Art and religion are certainly interesting enough, and their relation may not, in the end, be impossible to disentangle. No-one can be fully expert in all aspects of such an inquiry and a certain dilettantism is unavoidable. It is necessary to take risks to construct novel and creative hypotheses that can be further inspected, tested, and, if not falsified, gradually improved upon. A sensible limitation to a specific genre, geographical area, or historical period, with a concomitant narrowing of the relevant material, is an advantage that this study cannot have. My analyses in the following chapters stray into various fields in which I am not entirely expert and so will be vulnerable to the readings of specialists in each area. I am not an evolutionary biologist or geneticist—my appeals to those fields are made to support the coherence and viability of the understanding of art and of religion that I elucidate here rather than claiming to have unlocked the genetic code of religion.

I am attempting to write for readers of different backgrounds and I hope that my peers in the history and philosophy of religion will find something of use and value in the following speculations about religion in general. I also hope that students will be able to use the book to improve their understanding of the nature and interrelation of religion and art. Finally, I hope that the general reader with an interest in either religion or art will benefit from the book. With these things in mind, I can only call for an initially charitable

reading,² tolerant of failure to refer to all of the relevant literature, which allows the larger understanding to emerge. This study emerges from the aesthetics of religion, a subset of the philosophy of religion. It is, however, a philosophy of religion broadened along the three axes suggested by Kevin Schilbrack (2014), who proposed that a philosophy of religion that is adequate to its task (and not artificially restricted to problems of philosophical theology appropriate only within the Western monotheistic traditions) must be expanded along the axis of alternate religious traditions, the axis of lived as opposed to merely literate or intellectual religion, and the axis of other disciplines that study of religion. I entirely agree, and the following chapters seek to achieve a perspective that draws on the whole panoply of religious behavior, on a wide variety of disciplines, and on lived religion as a matter of human behavior and physical activity rather than abstract doctrine and disembodied thought.³

Given these caveats, an initially “artistic” approach that is necessarily creative is more appropriate than an attempt to be entirely prosaic, categorical, or pseudo-scientific. The braiding of an argument, no matter how prosaic and categorical the language employed, is a creative process, the art of which should not be underestimated.⁴ It is also necessarily historical to some extent. The study of religion properly constitutes a history and philosophy of religion,⁵ and I cheerfully count myself among those who insist on the creative nature of historiography. Nineteenth-century conceptions of science still haunt the contemporary understanding of history, but to quote Hayden White,

as a discourse about things no longer perceivable, historiography must construct, by which I mean imagine and conceptualize, its objects of interest before it can proceed to bring to bear upon them the kinds of procedures it wishes to use to “explain” or “understand” them.⁶

The discourse before you fully intends to be creative and I hope that it proves imaginative.

What’s the solution?

While this study is not itself science, it does use some of the findings of science. My intention is to investigate and elucidate the relationship between art and religion *as behaviors* and to do so I will apply techniques and concepts proper to “ethology.” This will, therefore, be an ethology rather than an aesthetic of religion. Ina Wunn’s entry in the second edition of the Macmillan *Encyclopedia of Religion* describes the ethology of religion (Wunn 2005). Wunn is a distinguished German scholar of religion with doctorates in both natural history and the history of religion who has written extensively on the ethology of religion. According to her *Habilitationsschrift* of 2002, she practices Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*) as “an interdisciplinary field

situated between the Humanities and Sciences [which] focuses primarily on the study of religious behaviour from the perspective of evolution theory.”⁷ An increasing number of scholars in the Anglophone world are beginning to adopt the same approach to Religious Studies as an evolutionary and behavioral enterprise. Ethology is a biological study of behavior, emphasizing that the physiological basis of behavior has evolved and should be studied as an aspect of evolution. Its roots can thus be traced directly to Darwin, and to some extent, it overlaps other disciplines such as sociobiology, behavioral ecology, evolutionary psychology, human anthropology, and consciousness studies (Wunn 2005, 2867). Scholars who have applied this approach to religion include Walter Burkert (1983, 1996), Frits Staal (1989), Weston La Barre (1972), Marvin Harris (1977, 1997), Robert Bellah (1970), and Roy Rappaport (1999). The whole movement that is generally termed the cognitive science of religion (CSR), being primarily the application of evolutionary psychology to the topic of religious behavior, constitutes a very significant element of the ethology of religion. Its proponents, from Scott Atran to David Sloan Wilson, can be counted as ethologists even though they seldom use the term.⁸ It is in the ethology of art that the term has come into its own.

Although ethology is the study of evolved behaviors, it must be distinguished from behaviorism. Behaviorism, properly speaking, is a group of doctrines related by their metaphysical concerns over dualism and their epistemological concerns over the status of mental terms and entities (Flanagan 1995). As it became increasingly radical, especially as expressed by B. F. Skinner (1904–1990), and sought to reject all reference to consciousness and all “mentalistic terms,” such behaviorism was increasingly and rightfully rejected. However, the fact that the word “behaviorism” is most often associated with this extreme, impractical, and widely scorned position did not prevent the greater part of the more reasonable principles of Skinner’s precursor, J. B. Watson (1878–1958), from being absorbed into psychology (Harzem 2004). The study of behavior constitutes a powerful focus without any need to *deny* the intentional states characteristic of mental phenomena associated with them. It does, as we will see, have certain implications about the nature of those states.

For my purposes the evolving unit is the human species with behavioral traits as part of its phenotype, rather than conceiving of religions, or some part of religious traditions such as rituals, as themselves evolving units.⁹ Early theorists who proposed “evolutionary” theories of religion, such as E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), R. R. Marett (1866–1943), and J. G. Frazer (854–1941), failed fully to understand or to apply a properly biological evolutionary understanding to religion and not only assumed religions themselves to be evolving units but also understood evolution as “a process of progressive development” rather than “the adaptive modification of organisms through time by means of natural variability and selection” (Wunn 2003, 391). This assumption reifies religions and reduces the evolutionary approach to a rather inappropriate metaphor instead of pursuing an actual ethology. It is my hope, building on

the ethology of art, to outline an ethological approach to religion that is more flexible and more appropriately adaptable to its topic.

In Part I, “Theorizing Religion and Art,” I lay out an understanding of the nature and the relation of art and religion, introducing its components sequentially to allow the ideas to grow organically. The chapter immediately after this general introduction describes the ethology of art, suggesting its utility to the study of religion. Although it is clearly relevant, the ethological approach to art is seldom applied to religion. The study of art as a behavior with adaptive evolutionary origins assumes that art must have made a positive contribution to survival and reproduction in the past since it has been selected for and become a universal human behavior. This not only explains a great deal about art but also shows significant promise as applicable to the analysis of religion. The Cognitive Science of Religion, discussed in the following chapter, studies religion as a product of natural, evolved cognition. That is, it takes an approach initially similar to the ethology of art, but, on the one hand, it largely fails to recognize religion as having developed as itself an adaptive behavior and, on the other, it aspires to be science rather than part of the humanities. If the insights of the ethology of art are integrated with insights from the cognitive science of religion, and if the resulting amalgam is allowed to be itself more of an art (a “liberal art”) akin to literary criticism, there are significant implications.

The proposed integration implies specific theoretical definitions of art and religion that could prove useful. Chapter 4 therefore considers the nature, structure, and function of definition so that this claim can be properly understood. Various types of definition, including lexical, ostensive, and intensional definitions, and definition by genus and species are explained. Art itself has always been difficult to define although the cluster of concepts and functions with which it is associated have been much discussed. The ethology of art looks at art in a particular way, which results in a relatively clear, if perhaps unusual, definition. Religion has been even more excruciatingly difficult to define, for related reasons and with similar outcomes. The dimensions in which religion operates can be described, but fitting them together into a theoretical definition—one which serves as a summary of a more ramified theoretical understanding—has eluded scholars of religion. If a perspective integrating the ethology of art and the cognitive science of religion be adopted, then, following the definition of art adduced by the ethology of art, religion can be defined in a closely related fashion.

The following chapter, “Beauty and religion. Seeing the world better,” observes that scholars from both the ethology of art and the cognitive science of religion have employed the idea of the “special” as the defining characteristic of their objects. Employing the word “beauty” to refer to the “special” in art, the chapter clarifies the identifying characteristics of beauty, contributing to an understanding of religion as a means of “seeing the world better.” That is, perception of the environment as suffused with cognizable agency is modified by means of focused and prolonged concentration on objects and

actions representative of that agency, such that behavioral response becomes more consistent, assured, and persistent. The effect of art objects and events as things made and apprehended as special is considered from ethological and anthropological perspectives. The agency of art—what art *does*—must be understood to recognize art as an evolutionary adaptation. This modification of cognition through fascination is suggested to be the behavior ancestral to both art and religion. Art and religion are distinct but related species of a single genus.

As has been mentioned, Mircea Eliade wrote significantly on art and religion. Although “the sacred” as employed by Eliade is sometimes assumed to be equivalent to “God” or to some autonomous “transcendental” entity, it is more consistent with his writings to identify it as an intentional or attributed characteristic, like beauty. We do not consciously and deliberately attribute beauty. On the contrary, we are moved by it. It is the agent and we the patient. Chapter 6 argues that Eliade’s analysis of the experience of the sacred in the profane is entirely consistent with the proposed ethological understanding. Just as “beauty” identifies that which is special in art, so too “the sacred” identifies that which is special in religion. Just as beauty is experienced—by some and not others—as inhering in, but not a simple property of, some entities and not others, so the sacred is differentially experienced for related reasons. Such experiences are products of an evolved capacity to detect, in a fashion that is faint and fallible but compelling, the promise of abiding benefit. “The perception of the sacred in the profane” can thus be identified with the paradoxical ability to “see the invisible” and “express the inexpressible” frequently attribute to the arts.

Chapter 7, “Wisdom and the personality of reality,” renders more explicit the understanding implicit in the preceding chapters. The human ability to empathize, applied to material culture and extended to natural phenomena, responds to agency, animate and inanimate, and provokes a similar response to agents that show similar promise of sustainable benefit. Those who recognize such agency and respond specifically, persistently, and with a high degree of assurance are regarded as “wise,” which is a universal category.

The concluding chapter of the first part gives a *précis* of the foregoing argument and an explicit statement of the understanding and the definitions it implies. According to ethologists and anthropologists of art, art behavior as an evolutionary adaptation has been practically beneficial in many ways. “Theory of mind” (the ability to attribute internal states such as beliefs, intentions, desires, emotions, or understanding, and to understand that others have internal states similar to one’s own) produces behavioral responses including fascination with the beautiful and assured responses to charismatic performance, to artifacts, and to other agents in the environment. When either performances or products stimulate a similar response, commanding our attention and determining our behavioral response, we are confronted with “beauty,” as described, induced by the “special” objects of art. When an extended matrix of such special objects induces persistent, focused behavior

we are dealing with “the sacred,” provoked by the special objects of religion, prompting assured and persistent behavior.

The second part of the work substantiates this understanding with historical examples that can be explained and understood in its light and, in turn, shed further light on this understanding. Chapter 9, “Divination: the vanishing point of religion” argues that if “the sacred” has the capacity to induce assured, persistent, and sustainable behavior, we might expect religion to be associated with conscious attempts to determine behavior. This is indeed what we find in an inspection of divination. Divination is precisely a means of determining subsequent actions, and it is a prime example of religious behavior. It illustrates precisely how religion operates in the fashion proposed. The following chapter, “From caves to cities: religion and the earliest art” considers some of the oldest examples of human material production as conforming to the identification of art and religion as descendants of a common ancestor. There are inherent difficulties in studying prehistoric religion but studying external behavior as opposed to internal belief has advantages. There is an ongoing controversy over the “religious” nature of Paleolithic art but a strong case can be made for recognizing it as religious in the suggested manner. Early in the Neolithic period, from around 9,500 until perhaps 8,000 BCE, the monumental installations of Göbekli Tepe in Turkey provide examples of human behavior that is unquestionably both art and religion and which can best be understood as the behavior ancestral to both. About 600 kilometers west of Göbekli Tepe, the domestic settlement of Çatalhöyük flourished from perhaps 500 years after Göbekli Tepe and continued to be occupied until around 5,700 BCE. It produced art that sheds a great deal of light upon the nature and function of the art/religion complex under consideration. The combination of the monumental style of Göbekli Tepe with the domestic style of Çatalhöyük can be seen in the development of the world’s earliest cities.

Since “the common ancestor of art and religion” is seen as a means of effective cognition inducing potentially persistent behavior, its association with occasionally rapid change must be explained. The processes that we now identify as art, as distinct from religion, increase awareness of potential innovation, while the processes that we now identify as religion, as distinct from art, organize those innovations into enduring structures of stylistically related objects and events that induce persistent, sustainable behavior.

Chapter 11 looks at Biblical prophecy in the mid-first millennium BCE as an example of the interaction of religion and art that provides compelling insight into the increasing success of the text as the exemplary sacred art. The following chapters, “Where is the Art we have Lost in Religion?” and “Where is the Religion we have Lost in Art?” give other examples of religion using the operations of art and of the importance of art and material culture to religious behavior. Chapter 12 looks at the operation of art objects and event in some of the other religions of the world. Hanumān, the eleventh avatar or incarnation of Śiva in the Hindu tradition, is considered

as particularly revealing of the attribution of “interiority” to religious representations. The example of the texts of Kongzi [Confucius] is drawn upon to clarify the similarity of ascriptions of personal and impersonal agency. The penultimate chapter considers the necessity of recognizing the importance of art and material culture in the study of religion through a consideration of two recent contributions to the field, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses* by S. Brent Plate and *Envisioning Howard Finster: The Religion and Art of a Stranger from Another World* by Norman Girardot. Emphasizing the irreducibly creative nature of such a study, it nonetheless argues for the importance of integrating insights from the scientific study of cognition. It also insists that the arts in all of their forms serve a moral role that cannot be reduced to a morally neutral, “aesthetic” function.

Chapter 14 concludes the work. The working hypothesis that has been developed is that religion consists of the composite effects of art that “expresses the inexpressible,” and allows “visions of the invisible” in a now specifically understood process. The human capacity for empathy or “theory of mind,” applied to inanimate objects and environmental agents, gives a powerful sense of the nature, character, or personality of that to which we must respond. This is induced by artful representation that is found to be ultimately worthy of attention and of the investment of time, effort, and resources, which induces persistent and assured behavior in a fashion that must have been beneficial to our Pleistocene ancestors. Some potential benefits and significant implications of that hypothesis are considered. While not yet proven this hypothesis promises potential methodological improvements, a path to clinical research, and is consistent with a very wide range of observations.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this chapter were previously published as “The Sacred and Sacrality: from Eliade to Evolutionary Ethology,” in *Religion* 47, no. 4 (2017): 663–687.
- 2 Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), 137 explains the philosophical justifications of such charitable reading.
- 3 Schilbrack speaks constantly of religion as “forms of practice” (31, 43, 127, etc.), as acts, without explicitly stating the importance of treating religion as *behavior*.
- 4 The idea of argument as a braid is taken from David Lewis-William’s excellent discussion of the construction of arguments (2002, 102–104).
- 5 Rennie (2012, 2014, 2016).
- 6 White (2000, 392). See Kindi (2010) for a compelling discussion of the specter of science that haunts historiography.
- 7 Taken from <http://ina-wunn.com/home.html> March, 2019.
- 8 In Michael Stausberg’s (2009) *Contemporary Theories of Religion*: 15 theories of religion published since 1980 are described, of which 12 can be recognized to constitute ethological studies in this sense although they are not identified as such.
- 9 In more recent work, Ina Wunn has attempted to describe religions as themselves evolving units (“What is Evolution and What Does Evolve?” Plenary address to the 2nd Evolution of Religion Conference, Santa Ana Pueblo, NM, November 14th, 2017). However, I am reluctant to follow this lead and continue to consider *homo sapiens* as the evolving unit of which religion is a behavioral trait.

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Part I

Theorizing religion and art



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2 The ethology of art (and religion)¹

It is possible to view human beings from an ethological perspective if one accepts—as seems undeniable—that man is an animal species who has evolved and whose behavior as well as his biological organs and systems has had adaptive or selective value in that evolution. Human ethologists propose that certain ubiquitous behavioral features or tendencies in man's life are an intrinsic, relatively unchangeable part of his nature and have arisen and been retained because they contribute positively to his evolutionary success, his survival as a species.

(Ellen Dissanayake, "Art as a Human Behavior:
Toward an Ethological View of Art," 398)

Even for those already familiar with the ethology of art, it will be worthwhile to explain precisely how I understand it in this context. Ethology is the general study of behaviors. The word comes from the Greek: *ἦθος*, *ethos*, "character"; and *-λογία*, *-logia*, as applied to all systematic studies. Properly speaking, it denotes the scientific study of animal behavior, a sub-topic of zoology. Applied to the study of culture and the arts, the ethological approach has gone by several names: biocultural criticism, a bioevolutionary approach, the adaptationist view, evolutionary aesthetics, literary Darwinism, and even "evocriticism" (Boyd 2009, 389). These often have more specific applications than the more general "ethology" that I prefer, but they all share the same assumption of Darwinian evolutionary theory. The more common "cognitive cultural studies" assumes that human cognition is a product of evolutionary processes and constitutes a very significant subset of the more general behavior of the species. The successful application of this ethological approach to literary criticism is a subset of its broader application to the arts in general.

The application of this approach to the study of art was pioneered by Ellen Dissanayake in her 1988 work, *What Is Art For?*, although with numerous precursors.² Since the appearance of Dissanayake's book, a growing number of scholars have become engaged with this approach.³ More recently "cognitive cultural studies" has received significant attention (see, for example, Zunshine 2010). Despite risks, this "ethological" approach has much to contribute. In attaining a clear understanding of art and of religion the real

problem lies not so much with ethology, which can be quite clearly described, but with its proposed object, art (and my object “religion”), neither of which can be easily defined. I will eventually make an attempt to stipulate specifically what the words “art” and “religion” are used to signify in the context of this book. First the two major strands of my argument—the ethology of art and the cognitive science of religion—must be sketched.

The ethology of art

Ellen Dissanayake is by no means unique in taking this approach, as we have seen, but her 1988 *What Is Art For?* is early, foundational, and clear, and it provides an excellent exemplar. Her analysis establishes several fundamental principles: art as a human behavior is taken to be a much broader category than the art of galleries, museums, concert halls, and canonical literature. It has biological, evolutionary roots, and these roots must have been adaptive—that is, beneficial to the survival and reproduction of the species—or the behavior would not be universal. (As we will see, that is not the only reason that the adaptive value of art is regarded as established.) In his 2009 *The Art Instinct*, Denis Dutton (1944–2010) describes adaptation as “an inherited physiological, affective, or behavioral characteristic that reliably develops in an organism, increasing its chances of survival and reproduction” (90–91), and Brian Boyd in *On the Origin of Stories*, describes it as

complex biological systems, physiological or behavioral, which through the cumulative Darwinian process of *blind variation and selective retention* have developed a *design* that reliably serves some *function*, in other words provides a sufficient solution to some problems a species faces to improve the chances of survival and reproduction.

(2009, 381, emphasis original)

Ernst Mayr, one of the leading evolutionary biologists of the 20th century, explained the idea more fully as

the morphological, physiological, and behavioral equipment of a species or of a member of a species that permits it to compete successfully with other members of its own species or with individuals of other species and that permits it to tolerate the extant physical environment.

(1988, 135)

Most basically, evolutionary psychologist Leda Cosmides defines an adaptive problem as any “problem whose solution can affect reproduction, however distally” (Cosmides et al. 1992, 8, quoted in Baron-Cohen 1995, 12).

One important question that must be considered immediately is raised by Dutton, who argues that “it follows necessarily that explaining religion