CARL RASCHKE

University of Denver

SAYING "YOU":
THE GRAMMAR OF ADDRESS AND THE LIMITATIONS OF
COGNITIVE THEORIES OF RELIGION

In the past few decades the so-called "scientific study of religion" (CSR) has migrated out of its primary habitat - the social sciences in general and the sociology of religion, in particular – to populate the relatively newer interdisciplinary fields of the *cognitive theory of religion*, which includes neuropsychology, linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, and computer science with a special focus on artificial intelligence (AI).[1] The results have been mixed, to say the least. While the most beneficial outcome of this migration has been that the empirical sciences now take the phenomenon of religion far more seriously than they did a generation ago, the theoretical advances concerning what religious belief and experience amount to from a solid "scientific" perspective have been extremely modest and have stalled for the most part.

Much of the literature concerning the cognitive theory of religion merely rehashes an undertaking known in the eighteenth century as the "natural history of religion", or "natural theology". Take, for example, Pascal Boyer's influential book *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary History of Religious Thought*. The book surveys a vast spectrum of religious claims and tenets from different cultures in the encyclopedic and fact-foraging fashion that characterized so much of anthropology throughout the Victorian era. Like those authors, Boyer comments extensively on both their consistency and their oddity, then draws the rather prosaic conclusion that "faith and belief seem to be simple by-

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[1] Some of the major works, to name just a few, are Stewart E. Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1994); Harvey Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Justin Barrett *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (Conshohocken PA: Templeton Press, 2011); Claire White, An Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Religion: Connecting Evolution, Brain, Cognition and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2021)' Robert McCauley *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Justin Barrett; *The Oxford Handbook of the Cognitive Science of Religion* (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

products of the way concepts and inferences are doing their work for religion in much the same way as for other domains."[2] His methodology is not much different from that of a prolix uncle at a family Thanksgiving dinner who holds the younger generation in suspense with an unstinting stream of fetching anecdotes that ultimately do nothing more than state and restate the obvious. Many of these "cognitive scientists" also draw routinely on Anglo-American analytic philosophy which, as its founding father and gray eminence Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, seeks mainly to clarify how we use language in quotidian discourse. Philosophy, for Wittgenstein, is thus a kind of "therapy" that helps us clarify our most fundamental concepts.[3]

Language philosophy of the ilk Wittgenstein sired is often melded with anthropology to foster the impression that the cognitive theory of religion no longer simply prostrates itself before the now discredited dogmas of "logical positivism", or "logical empiricism", which rely on grand, "nomothetical" strategies of explanation. A notable example of this approach can be found in the book by Robert McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson entitled *Philosophical Foundations of the Cognitive Science of Religion*. McCauley, often credited as the founder of the cognitive science of religion, and Lawson set forth a game plan which they describe as "explanatory pluralism". Rather than trundling out the well-worn notion that any "scientific" account of religion must remain subservient to the mathematico-deductive methodologies of the natural sciences, McCauley and Lawson "enrich our understanding" of the data of religion "by showing how they connect with operations of the human mind/brain, which is both embodied and embedded in traditions, cultures, and discourses." How does "explanatory pluralism" work exactly? The authors write:

The cognitive science of religion does so by enlisting and integrating both the findings and the methods of at least a half dozen different scientific approaches and their concomitant theoretical perspectives. Those perspectives include the cognitive, developmental, comparative, evolutionary, neural, and archaeological, to name but some of the most prominent. Cognitive scientists of religion have begun to deploy those methods to generate all sorts of new evidence bearing on our understanding of both religious systems and individuals' religious cognition and conduct.[4]

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[2] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 330.

[3] Wittgenstein elaborates this approach in sections 126-135 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 47-9.

[4] Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson, *Philosophical Foundations of the Cognitive Science of Religion: A Head Start* (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2017), 3.

Unfortunately, all the kinds of "new evidence" which the authors tout, on careful reading, turn out to be sundry examples and anecdotes of anthropological inquiry that long predate any particular self-defined disciplinary specialty that one day would add the qualifier "cognitive" to its mode of research. It would be an overstatement to say that the "cognitive science of religion" is merely anthropological functionalism gussied up in the latest fashionable garb. But the notion of "cognitive science", especially as it has been deployed in the field of psychology, routinely prioritizes approaches that open new theoretical vistas, drawing on such relatively fledgling subdisciplines as information theory, molecular neurobiology, or computational neuroscience. While boasting about its novel, interdisciplinary sweep, the cognitive science of religion as outlined by McCauley and Lawson tends to fall back in very large measure on the long established protocols of cultural anthropology and the general tack it takes toward socially constructed norms and formats that often converge under the rubric of what come to be called "symbolic interactionism" developed by the early twentieth century sociologist George Herbert Mead.[5] McCauley and Lawson are still stepping into the skirmishes of a half century ago over whether the study of religion should lean on the social sciences rather its traditional patron of theology. McCauley and Lawson opine that "to begin with the narrowest battle, in a new academic study of religion, the study of religion must genuinely free itself from theology." That is because, they argue, the study of religion must not only be "pluralistic" in its methods but in its subject matter. "We have already indicated," they assert, "that we believe that any insistence upon a unique object or method will inevitably founder on theological rocks."[6] In short, the cognitive "science" of religion is indistinguishable by such an account from the sprawling academic field of religious studies, which on its own reckoning insists it is not a science.

The Origins of the Cognitive Theory of Religion

Cognitive psychology at its very inception in the 1950s strove to counter the then trendy behaviorist paradigm of mental processes, dismissing them as an opaque "black box" that could never be deciphered by the empirical sciences. Behaviorism reduced "mind" merely to stimulus and response. The early prestige of behaviorism led the famed Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle to upend the familiar Cartesian "mind-body dualism" and dismiss the entire theory of consciousness as a "two worlds story," a "myth" of "the ghost in the machine". Ryle argued that cognitive operations such as thinking, knowing, and feeling are not

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[5] See George Herbert *Mead, Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[6] *Philosophical Foundations of the Cognitive Sciences*, op. cit., 70.

distinct from intelligent actions—they are in fact those very actions.[7] Although Ryle was a logical empiricist who gave scant attention to how human language functions, cognitive psychology drew heavily not only on analytic philosophy but also the emergent science of linguistics to press the case that the so-called "theory of mind" is not some fanciful speculation about ghostly cerebral apparitions, but the inevitable result of the fusion of symbolic communication with reflexive mental activity. The work of the philosopher of language Donald Davidson, for instances, has been instrumental in countering the kind of "behaviorist" critique that held sway for so long because of Ryle's influence,[8] and it has had a major impact on cognitive theory on the main.

Davidson called his approach "anomalous monism", which maintains that, while mental states are indistinguishable from physical states, they cannot be reduced to physical explanations due to a dearth of strict psychophysical laws. Thus, psychology cannot be treated as a science in the same manner that physics can, even though mental states still share a physical ontology. Davidson also set forth the notion of "triangulation", which asserts that thought and meaning require interaction between at least two minds and a shared external world. The principle of triangulation stresses both the social and relational character of thought formation, where intersubjective communication serves as an "external check" that makes possible the sort of intellectual consensus we regard as "objectivity". Davidson's theories challenged reductionist views of the mind, such as Ryle's, chartering a nuanced angle of vision that confirms "physicalism" while simultaneously underscoring the irreducibility of mental phenomena.[9] It is Davidson's claim about the critical role of *intersubjectivity* as it plays out in both language and cognition that, according to Gabriel Levy, makes a cognitive theory of religion viable in the first place. According to Levy, "intersubjectivity not only grounds semantics, but it is also the source of objectivity" when it comes to numerous models of cognition, including those that happen to deal with God or spirituality.[10]

But the cognitive conundrum of intersubjectivity can also be leveraged in another, compelling way to pursue the problem of religious experience, especially when it comes to what is often the most perplexing challenge for such inquiries – belief in a personal God. The

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[7] See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

[8] See, for example, Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2001); Inquires into *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001*); Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

[9] See Jaegwon Kim, "Philosophy of Mind and Psychology," in *Donald Davidson*, edited by Kirk Ludwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 113-36.

[10] Gabriel Levy, *Beyond Heaven and Earth: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2022), 16.

cognitive science of religion engenders several major theories to explain belief in a personal god. The first is the so-called "theory of mind", a human propensity for ascribing mental states, intentions, and feelings to other individuals. According to CSR, theory of mind performs a crucial role in the formulation of religious "frames" by enabling subjects to conceptualize and enter into a relationship with supernatural or transcendental entities.[11] A second is the putative "hyperactive agency detection" device, which proposes that human beings have evolved to be overly sensitive in detecting agency in their surroundings. It can also lead to attributing intentionality to natural phenomena, while enhancing belief in powerful but invisible beings.[12] A third is what has come to be known as "minimally counterintuitive concepts". In this prototype, religious notions entail concepts that are mostly intuitive but violate expectations in several extraordinary ways – for example, divine beings with human-like minds yet possessing supernatural abilities. According to theorists such as Barrett such concepts are "cognitively optimal" for the purpose of both transmission and retention.[13] A fourth is "intuitive dualism", the hypothesis that there exists a natural propensity to distinguish between mind and body, bolstering the tendency to grant the reality of souls, spirits, and non-corporeal deities. A fifth is familiar to the history of philosophy, i.e., so-called "teleological thinking", or the predisposition to infer design and specific purpose in the course of everyday happenstance, out of which emerges belief in a divine architect or designer. The sixth, according to the same literature, is "mentalizing", which is intimately associated with the "theory of mind" and consists in reasoning about the mental disposition or states of other persons. Research suggests that individual differences in mentalizing abilities are associated with religious belief. According to Willard and Norenzayan, the foregoing cognitive mechanisms interact with cultural and environmental factors to configure religious attitudes and convictions, especially the belief in a personal deity. CSR interprets religiosity as a natural or neuro-cognitive phenomenon inherent in and interspersed with everyday cognitive operations rather than as something completely divorced from other aspects of human experience and reasoning.[14]

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[11] See Ayana K. Willard and Ara Norenzayan, *Cognition* 129 (2013): 279-91.

[12] See Justin Barrett, "Exploring the natural foundations of religion", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 4:29–34. See also Robin Attfield, "HADD, Determinism, and Epicureanism", An Interdisciplinary Investigation, in Roger Trigg and Jusstin Barrett, *The Roots of Religion: Exploring the Cognitive Science of Religion* (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 75-90; Graham Wood, "Understanding 'Person Talk': When is it Appropriate to Think in Terms of Persons, in Trigg and Barrett, ibid., 91-112.

[13] Barrett, Justin L. "Cognitive science of religion: What is it and why is it?." *Religion Compass* 1(2007): 768-786.

[14] Willard and Norenzayan, op. cit. See also Tyler Greenway and Justin Barrett, "Theology and the Cognitive Science of Religion", in *St. Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et. al.

It is in this connection that the work of Helen De Cruz becomes quite relevant. De Cruz is well-known for her position that the cognitive science of religion must be paired methodologically with the philosophy of religion.[15] De Cruz argues that while religious beliefs may generate spontaneously, a theistic framework for such belief demands a certain measure of informal learning. She notes that there arise specific variations in theistic beliefs, which in turn comport with cognitive capacities such as "theory of mind" and analytic prowess. In deploying discoveries from cognitive science De Cruz offers a model explaining the phenomenon of "nonresistant" nonbelief.[16] This approach offers a fresh perspective on the problem of divine hiddenness, considering how cognitive factors might influence an individual's capacity for belief or nonbelief in God. De Cruz explores the plausibility of various responses to the problem of divine hiddenness, such as "epistemic distance", a notion developed by philosopher John Hick.[17]

De Cruz's research fits within a more expansive scholarly project that incorporates empirical evidence from cognitive science with debates within religion concerning religious epistemology. Her approach exemplifies an interdisciplinary method melding philosophical analysis with the scientific study of religion. On the other hand, De Cruz's approach betrays the rather simplistic and even quasi-reductionistic standpoint of so much cognitive theory of religion. De Cruz ultimately concludes that theism, with its commitment to the construct of a personal deity, ultimately can be explicated in terms of what psychologists term "attachment theory", a view that much of human affect and thought patterning has an etiology in early emotional bonds between an infant and their parents or caregivers. "Religious believers", she writes "experience an attachment relationship with God, which capitalizes on features of human psychology, such as actively soliciting

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https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TheologyandtheCognitiveScienceofReligion. Accessed February 16, 2025.

[15] See Helen DeCruz and Johan De Smedt, *A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2015), 45-7.

[16] See Helen De Cruz, "Divine Hiddenness and the Cognitive Science of Religion", in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief*, edited by Adam Green and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 53-68.

[17] Hick characterizes the concept of "epistemic distances" as follows: "if men and women had been initially created in the direct presence of God (who is infinite in life, power, goodness, and knowledge), they would have no genuine freedom in relation to their Maker. In order to be fully personal and therefore morally free beings, they have accordingly (it is suggested) been created at a distance from God—not a spatial but an epistemic distance, a distance in the dimension of knowledge. They are formed within and as part of an autonomous universe within which God is not overwhelmingly evident but in which God may become known by the free interpretative response of faith." John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 44.

and maintaining contact with caregivers."[18] In many ways such interpolations amount to little more than warmed over psychoanalytical projection theory.

From Analytic to Continental Philosophy

Yet if cognitive theory, broadly conceived, is truly going to render intelligible the age-old and widespread conviction among different religions (not only Judaism and Christianity, but numerous sects of Islam and Hinduism) that *God is personal*, it will have to disengage from both logical empiricism and Anglo-American analytical philosophy and begin to take seriously Continental Philosophy, especially the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel wrote in *The Science of Logic* that while "animals cannot say 'I', man can, because it is his nature to think."[19] It is the unique *primordialization* of the "I" in the "I think" – Descartes' ego *cogito*, which he propounded as the "Archimedean point" not only for all philosophy but for cognition as a whole – that grounds the enterprise of what we term "modern" philosophy. Additionally, it throws into relief Davidson's "discovery" that *subjectivity* – or at least whatever we mean by the concept – poses a far greater challenge than the bare self-certainty that Descartes uncovers in his first *Meditation*. Kant took up this discussion in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. He referred to the principle whereby the "I" is no longer intelligible without the contents of consciousness as the "transcendental unity of apperception". Such a principle implies the necessary unity of consciousness that enables us to consign all our representations or "contents" to a single, identical self. Kant writes that "the transcendental unity of apperception is that unity through which all of the manifold given in an intuition is united in a concept of the object."[20]

However, later in his *Critique,* Kant comes to recognize the unity of the object as indistinguishable from the unity of the subject. The unity of the object depends on the flow of lived experience, which in turn requires a profound sense of the unity of multiple temporalized moments of experience that inhere in the Cartesian *ego cogito.* According to Kant, we are "acquainted only" with "the unity of consciousness" insofar as "we have an indispensable need of it for the possibility of experience, and even to extend our cognition to the nature of all thinking beings in general, through the empirical but in regard to

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[18] De Cruz, "Divine Hiddenness", op. cit. 68.

[19] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1892), 48.

[20] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 250.

all kinds of intuition indeterminate proposition 'I think'"[21] In other words, there is no "I" without the totality of individual cognition we recognize in ourselves and at the same time in all other thinking beings. The unity of "objective" consciousness hinges, therefore, on intersubjective recognition of other consciousnesses that are comparable to ourselves. In other words, I must be addressed by, or at minimum, be in some sort of communicative relation with others to know what "I" means. We know "they" are like us because they have engaged and interacted with us through language. They have each in their own way forged my sense of "I" by saying "you" to me.

My discovery of my own "I" during my kindergarten years was not exactly an act of "thinking," nor did I associate it exactly with any "transcendental unity" of my memories and experiences. That discovery was more an occasion for "revelation," not in any religious sense of the word, but as a sudden and unprecedented awareness which I, in my early psychological development, had never undergone before. But please take note – what made "me" aware that I was "I" was my ability to speak in the first person, to name myself. Yet I could never have named myself without someone first naming me. It was my parents who gave me the name "Carl" by which I have known myself my whole life. I don't ever remember them calling me out by name prior to this incident. But I'm sure they did so many times. They certainly didn't say "hey, you." I didn't even have a nickname, because my parents explained to me when I was quite young that the proper name they gave me was one from which it is unusual to derive a nickname. They did the same for my twin brother, and from our infancies I'm absolutely sure they always addressed us by our respective names.

Very young children internalize their given names quickly, almost as immediately as they instinctively call their parents "Mommy" or "Daddy". But very often they respond to their names as more a reflex rather than as any profound theoretical insight about what the word "I" means. You can know that you are called "Carl" long before you can say "*I am* Carl." That very process is tacit in the grammatical constructions from various languages where to say "my name is" (for example, *ich heisse* in German, or *me llamo* in Spanish) should be literally translated as "I am called." The ability to use the first-person pronoun requires a sense of the "you" that calls our own name, or at least to tell us that this vague sense of "I", which precedes our ability to actually *say* "I" meaningfully, has a name.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan proposed three quarters of a century ago that infants between the ages of six months and a year

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[21] Ibid., 452.

come to recognize for the first time that a reflection they see of themselves in a mirror is not some alien creature, but inseparably connected somehow with who *they* are. The behavior of human infants when confronted with their own image is distinctly different from other animals, even chimpanzees, who become curious but quickly lose interest. Lacan, however, emphasized that what we call "subjectivity", or the sense of self, does not really emerge until there is some kind of validation from a parent, or whom we would designate as a "significant other." That validation depends on our capacity to crystallize that intuition of self in a specific word, which at first may be the name by which we are called, while later it is the more general first-person pronoun. Up until a certain age, Lacan writes, "it is not the outside world that one lacks," but "it is oneself."[22]

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was Lacan's contemporary, had made the claim that our sense of "I" arises in the course of cultural evolution when human beings acquire the power of "rationality". Lévi-Strauss, like so many of his European academic predecessors who compared modern thought processes with what he termed "the savage mind", held that the "primitive" sense of "I" cannot be disentangled from a magical identification with supernatural gods and spirits. But Lacan believed that what we call "rationality" depends on our competence in enunciating precisely what we *desire*, as when a child no longer merely cries because they are hungry, or have a soiled diaper, but can say "I want *x*." In the latter case the "I" of "I want" does not necessarily convey a sense of selfhood, but serves as the mastery of a set of grammatical rules through which one can voice their own internal feelings, or affects, and associate them with a specific object. The bottom line is that both reason and desire require the mastery of language.

Not just philosophers, psychoanalysts, and anthropologists, but also developmental psychologists have performed decades of research and published volumes of findings on how children over time forge a concept of their own individual identity. In addition, the broader problem of personal "identity" in recent years has become a major focus of social and political thinkers, as in the fraught phrase "identity politics." The process by which particular individuals, or an entire people, construct their own identities, however, is not the issue with which we are at all concerned. Our task is something much more ambitious. We are bent instead on discovering the origin of human identity itself, especially as it is enveloped in the universal human practice of naming somebody, and hearing and responding to somebody else who calls out our name. We will bring into focus the conjugal relationship between the signifiers "I" and "you".

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[22] Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety*, trans. A.R. Price (New York: Polity Press, 2014), 118-19.

"Divine" Calling and Naming

In virtually all cultures up until the modern age the "name" someone bears, together with the one that parents confer at birth on their children, has been considered to have certain magical or sacral qualities. As Loren Graham writes, "a common concept in history is that knowing the name of something or someone gives one power over that thing or person. This concept occurs in many different forms in numerous cultures—ancient and primitive tribes, Islam, Judaism, and in Egyptian, Vedic, Hindu, and Christian traditions."[23] But naming in many cultures historically has been part of a religious or ritual process in which the child's destiny is bound up with the appellation they are given. In some instances the child's name is not necessary conferred at birth, but reserved until it becomes clearer what unique personality traits or abilities they might possess.[24] The well-known saying of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who lived around the turn of the 6th century B.C.E., that "one's character is destiny" reflects the sentiment that a person's future greatness or obscurity remains inseparable from the distinct constellation of moral habits and unconscious psychological tendencies that shape our everyday behavior. In fact, the Greek term Heraclitus uses for "character" is *ethos*, from which we obtain the word "ethics." Who we are in our deepest makeup, which also includes how we are apt to treat others, influences our most probable choices in life. Thus the "name" we are given, and how we regard the names of others, have outsized significance for what is at stake when we employ the personal pronouns "you" and "I". We often have special names for those whom we are very close to and are dear to us. It is no accident that the names of important religious leaders are frequently the most common names given to children in certain cultures. Thus, Jesús is a very popular name for boys in Mexico, while Mohammed is by far the most common one in Islamic cultures.

If we turn to the Bible, especially the Hebrew scriptures, we find that naming, identity, and destiny are intricately intertwined with each other. Moreover, naming is a function of divine "calling". When God names something, or someone, he does not merely slap an arbitrary label on what he is naming. He gives he, she, or it life. In Genesis 1 whenever God creates something, he gives it "life," which consists in a transfer of the divine "spirit" to it. This transfer of spirit is indicated by the Hebrew word בָּרַךְ (*barak*="to bless"). A "blessing" in common parlance is usually taken to be the granting or acquisition of good

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[23] Loren Graham, "The Power of Names", *Theology and Science*, 9 (2011):157.
[24] See Albert Doja, "Rituals of Naming and Exposure: Meaning and Signification in a Name," *Onoma: Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences*, 41 (2006): 240-1; see also Gloria Main, "Naming Children in Early New England," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (1996): 1-27.

fortune, but all blessings in the Biblical sense invariably come from the power of God to create and sustain life. Thus, whenever God creates the different animals in Genesis 1, he completes his work with a "blessing." Interestingly, in Genesis it is Adam, the first human being, who actually "names" the animal. But Adam does not name himself. He receives that from God through an impartation of spirit. "Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."[25] The power to name is but an extension of the "character" that God bestowed on his human creation. As a couple Adam and Eve, who as "male and female" reflect the divine image, are "destined" to become God's co-creators with both the power to name and the capacity to bless. That is what is implied in the divine command to "be fruitful and multiply." It is not merely about having progeny, but about increasing the "stock" of "named" and "blessed" people, animated by the divine spirit, and things which will redound to all of creation itself and ultimately to God's glory.

Of course, the chapters immediately following the divine commission tell a quite different story. The downward spiral begins with the temptation of Eve and the succumbing of the primal pair to the serpent's deception, leading to their eyes having been "opened" not at all to a vast new universe of godlike knowledge, but to their own nakedness and shame. With this loss of innocence, they are permanently expelled from paradise while their descendants are compelled to wander the earth. The drama of expulsion is augmented by Cain's murder of Abel, the punishment for which is a permanent nomadism and the withdrawal of God's presence from their lives. The proliferation of human beings throughout the world does not follow the trajectory God the Creator had in mind. It takes place as the "secular" outcome of human disregard for the divine commission. This trajectory reaches its nadir in the days before the great flood when the "sons of God", identified in classic Christian literature with the rebel angels, begin to mate with the "daughters of men",[26] and the now mongrelized human race has sunk into a cesspool of abject immorality and evil. God laments that "my Spirit will not contend with humans forever," and he reluctantly resolves to wipe them off the face of the earth with a deluge.[27] Ironically, it is only the "Nephilim," the monstrous offspring of the "sons of God", who can establish a "name" (שם="shem") for themselves,[28] but it is one granted by the idolatrous admiration of other human beings, not by "the Lord" himself. The "fulfillment" of the original commandment to be fruitful and multiply is countermanded

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[25] Gen. 2:7, NIV.

[26] Gen. 6:1-3, NIV.
[27] Gen. 6:3-8, NIV.
[28] Gen. 6:4, NIV.

by the Lord himself, who through the Flood brings the human race to the brink of extinction.

Even after the flood and the restoration of the human line of descent through Noah's progeny, successful implementation of the divine commission remains in doubt. Whereas it was egotism and violence that had led to the total corruption of the human race before the Food, it is collective human pride that now stands in the way between God and those who putatively bear his "image." The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is one of the most enigmatic accounts in the Book of Genesis, because it never becomes clear what it was exactly in the tale human beings did that displeased God and caused him to "confuse their language so they will not understand each other."[29] Their ostensible offense, according once again to traditional interpretations, was collective pride or *hubris*. The terse, Biblical narrative unfolds as follows:

> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."[30]

Like the story of Cain who, after slaying his brother, becomes the founder of the first city, the episode of the Tower of Babel seems to be about the danger of "ungodly" living that comes with the concentration of populations in urban centers. One scholar has asked "why was the tower an offense against God? What was it about the people's unity that God rejected?" Furthermore, why should we construe the "scattering" of the people of Babel as an act of God's "judgment" when "dispersal was presented positively as God's blessing in the creation and flood accounts"? The problem was not that God rejected the people's effort to unify. "Indeed, there was a unity desired by God, but it was one bestowed by God, not one founded on a social state. The postdiluvian community resisted the divine command to 'increase' and 'fill the earth'…In their eyes their security rested on their homogeneity, and thus they set about to preserve their union by building as a haven with its symbolic tower of corporate achievement."[31] Hence, the people of Babel strove to "make a name" for themselves through a communal

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[29] Gen. 11:6, NIV.

[30] Gen. 11:1-4, NIV.

[31] Kenneth A. Mathews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1a (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 473.

feat of engineering and cultural achievement, which was not at all the purpose God intended for them.

The saga of Babel concludes what is often termed by scholars the "pre-history" of the human race. The period of "pre-history" is remarkably devoid of heroic figures with the exception perhaps of Noah, who after saving God's creation through his faithfulness in building the ark nonetheless disgraces himself by getting drunk and exposing himself to his sons.[32] It is with the story of Abraham, which begins in Genesis 12, that we for the first time acquire some sense of what "naming" and "calling" truly mean.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."[33]

It is only now, after many false starts, that the plan for the "salvation" of humanity, which in truth cannot be distinguished from the command in Genesis 1 to be fruitful and to multiply, can at last commence. Unlike the misadventure that was the Tower of Babel, Abraham's "name" will become "great" not because of his achievements but on account of his faithfulness in following God's "calling." In fact, it is God, not Abraham, who will make his name "great" and will bestow the "blessing." The "greatness" of the name will not be bound up with any kind of spectacular social or political achievement, but gradually over time through the persistence and loyalty of Abraham's own wandering descendants. Greatness lies yet in the future. It is not something predicated of the Jewish people per se. It is something to be realized. It is through Abraham's not-so-distinguished family line that the entire world will be changed. Abraham's "identity", therefore, is conferred on him solely by dint of his willingness to fulfill the "divine" task assigned him. It is not even clear at the outset what exactly the task will be. As the Jewish scholar Jon D. Levenson points out, the nation of Israel which was to become Abraham's legacy "never had an identity unconnected to the God who called it into existence in the beginning and has graciously sustained it ever after."[34] And even that identity is not made obvious in the "call" to Abraham. Abraham is simply the one who responds to the call and the still amorphous "promise" that he will eventually become a "great nation."

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[32] Gen. 9:20-27.
[33] Gen. 12:1-5, NIV.
[34] John D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 22.

We should also note that Abraham is not even commended in the traditions that have grown up around him, especially in Judaism and Christianity, as some sort of "holy man" who models pious behavior for the generations who come after him. Abraham's importance lies not so much in how he performs, or what he accomplishes, as in the historical role he plays. For Jews, he is simply the founder of the Jewish people, who refer to him as "Father Abraham." For Muslims, Abraham will not bow to idolatrous worship. For Christians, it is simply his faithfulness. Paul, who explains to his readers the significance of Abraham in the fourth chapter of Romans, asks the following: "what does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'"[35] The Christian interpretation, as formulated by Paul, turns not on the details of Abraham's life, which follow a complex and unsteady line of flight that can even be compared with a soap opera, but on the simple fact that he "believed" God.

Let's take a look at the entire context of the tale of Abraham in Genesis 15. We should keep in mind that the preceding chapter tells a rather raucous tale of Abraham gathering together several hundred "vigilantes" to rescue his nephew Lot, who always seems to be getting into trouble, from some powerful, but unsavory characters who have taken him hostage.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit[c] my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be. "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."[36]

What can only be described as a typical, everyday brawl among Bedouin tribes for land, captives, or booty becomes the solemn occasion for a divine revelation in a dream that begins to fill out for Abraham what exactly the "promise" was all about. The promise is no way an off-the-cuff or an idle one. The mysterious God who had initially "called" Abraham "seals" his promise by making a "covenant" or *berith*

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[35] Rom. 4:3, NIV.
[36] Gen. 15:1-7, NIV.

(בְּרִית). The Hebrew word *berith* derives from the verb meaning "to cut." The *berith* was a common form of pact-making (or, as we would say today, "sealing the deal") in the Ancient Near East. It was carried out by sacrificing an animal, which was then divided into two pieces. The two parties to the covenant would then pass "between the pieces," a ritual affirming their absolute obligation to each other to carry out the terms of the agreement. In Genesis 17 the meaning of this covenant becomes clear. Yahweh, or "the Lord", gives the man Abram (which means "exalted father" in Hebrew) the new name of "Abraham" by which he is commonly known today. The new name can be translated as "father of the multitude". God the covenant-maker explains it in the following manner:

No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.[37] In other words, Abraham's new "name" instantiates his divine calling. His "identity" is expanded from his role as the patriarch of a sizable influential clan to someone who, through his offspring, will accomplish the grand historical design of a "mighty", yet still largely unknown God. Abram's wife Sarai has her name changed as well in keeping with this new commission and destiny. She is now "Sarah", or "mother of nations."

Once read carefully, the highly tangled and fraught narrative of Abraham and Sarah in no way glorifies them for their virtues as individuals. The same is even more true of their descendants, who like Jacob and most of Joseph's brothers turn out to be morally flawed and dodgy people. The story of Abraham, which along with Plato's account of a Socrates who heroically refuses to sacrifice what he terms the philosophically "examined life" to the conventional wisdom of his day, is one of the archetypal sagas of Western civilization. It illumines the deeper question of what it means to say "you and I." To say "I" has no meaning without a larger and more encompassing sense of what I am tasked in life to do. People who have lost all sense of purpose, regardless of whether they attribute it to some mysterious "calling", tend to live shorter and emptier lives, frequently ending with suicide or the cumulative effect of addictions such as drugs and alcohol. The "meaning of life," which is both a spiritual and philosophical question,

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[37] Gen. 17:5-8, NIV.

can all too frequently serve as cartoon caricatures or idle jokes, but strikes at the very heart of how we cope daily as human beings.   In many cases we do not really discern the meaning of our lives until we are dead and gone.

History is littered with the biographies of people – for example, the Danish author Søren Kierkegaard or the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh - who died penniless, distraught, and unknown, only to be remembered by future generations as geniuses who turned the world upside down. We are who we are because of how others (the *yous* in our lives) speak to us and regard us both while we are alive as well as among our progeny and in the vast concourse of collective memory and reflection. Some *yous* count more than others – for instance, our close friends and intimate relations who love us and remember us both in this life and beyond the grave. These special *yous* give us courage and confidence to carry out what we believe is our life's mission. But it is ultimately what we believe to be the "calling" from a supreme *You* in the mysterious beyond, a calling we barely grasp but somehow "know" is true and right. We may never in our lifetime see actual evidence of what we are called to set in motion. That is the implicit meaning of the Biblical account of Abraham that because he "believed God" it was "reckoned to him as righteousness."

Or consider the story of Moses, found in the Book of Exodus. Moses is a "Hebrew" or *Habiru*, which in ancient Semitic languages means "outcast" or "outlaw".   Moses is raised in the palace of Pharaoh, god-king of the dominant civilization of the second millennium BCE. But he identifies with his own people, whom the Egyptians oppressed. Finally, in anger he kills an Egyptian taskmaster and is cast into exile far away from where he grew up. But then he encounters the mighty and nameless God who promises to realize the promise given to Abraham and liberate his people from slavery. This God, who speaks at first through the burning bush, discloses something both remarkable and incomparable in the history of human religious experience. Moses asks what is the name of this God, who is instructing him to go back to Egypt and confront Pharaoh. God responds, according to most translations, that "I AM" is the one who has spoken to him. This particular incident in Scripture, detailed in the third chapter of Exodus, is well-known. But the giving of the name I AM is far more significant as well as enigmatic and fraught than a garden variety recounting of the Biblical narrative suggests.   The name of this God in Hebrew is "Yahweh" (יהוה). often referred to as the "Tetragrammaton", a Greek word meaning "four letters".   For orthodox Jews, the name "Yahweh" cannot be uttered because it is too holy. The Jewish Masoretic scribes of the Middle Ages added the vowel points in sequence of short "e", short "a", and "short e" to the Hebrew name as written (ancient Hebrew only used consonants). The vowel points were for the pronunciation of the

word "Adonai"(אדוני **)** or "my lords," used routinely in Jewish ritual in place of YHWH. The "Y" sound (pronounced like a "J" sound in European languages) thus led to the name "Yahweh" pronounced in the vernacular as "Jehovah."   The words "I Am", or "I am that I Am" are a rough translation of the Hebrew. Because the "Hebrew language" does not use the present tense, only verb forms implying the completion or incompletion of action, a more precise translation of the Tetragammaton would be "I will be what I will be," or as some scholars have hypothesized, "I can cause to happen what I cause to happen."

Regardless of the proper translation of the term, what remains most striking about this "revelation" is the fact that God's true name is given in the first person "I". This first-person singular is built into the very meaning of the Tetragrammaton, and is not just a random construction given the semantic context. In the revelation God does not say "my name is Yahweh", as if it were simply a proper name like Joe or Mary, or even Zeus or Baal. It is a name by its very utterance explodes all finite grammars and forms of naming. It bespeaks the infinite, creative, and connotative power of the name itself. Sometimes pious Jews substitute for the word "Yahweh" simply the Jewish locution "ha shem" (השם) , or THE NAME.

From the Given to the Deixic

So, what does all the foregoing have to do with the cognitive theory of religion? The cognitive theory of religion has stumbled along and made hardly any headway in recent years for reasons that are much more straightforward than many assume. The cognitive theory of religion suffers from one of the very limitations of cognitive theory in general, which amounts to a penchant for reducing the phenomenal to the observable, an illustration of what Ryle himself dubbed a "category mistake". A category mistake consists in a semantic error through which something belonging to one category is confused with something that should be placed in a different category.[38] The category mistake, which cognitive theory inflicts on our epistemology, is the misconception that what we perceive, and we can articulate are somehow separable from each other. In short, the phenomenal depends on what is *symbolizable* or what, broadly speaking, can be named. The observable, or phenomenal, is always an output of the generalizable function of symbol -production. By the "phenomenal" I am referring to the fluid aggregation of primordial sense data, what in the parlance of early modern philosophy is often termed the "given". As Kant underscored, however, nothing is actually "given" in any meaningful sense of the word. Cognition requires *mediation*, which exposes the notion of the "im-mediate" or simply "given" as itself as

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[38] Ryle, op. cit., 18-19.

something that is saturated with symbolic interventions. Kant dubbed these interventions "categories" or "concepts of understanding". The twentieth century philosopher Wilfrid Sellars referred to them as "inferences". In his groundbreaking book *The Myth of the Given* Sellars takes a more sophisticated, yet quite similar tack in advancing the notion that there can be no presumed "immediate" knowledge that somehow remains "non-inferential".[39] Both Kant and Sellars in their own style contend that the coherence of even the most primitive perception depends on an articulation of rudimentary, "mediating" sign-functions. That recognition lurks behind Kant's celebrated quip that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind".[40]

Cognitive theory assents to this fundamental principle in tracing the etiology of all human experience. That is why, from an historical vantage point, cognitive theory and the science of linguistics have developed to a certain degree in tandem with each other. At the same time, the cognitive theory of religion, which in many cases seeks to amplify what a previous generation of analytic philosophers routinely regarded as the "peculiarity" of the syntax of religious language with the observational metrics of experimental brain science, falls flat because it tries to force the data of observation into the Procrustean bed of its own idiosyncratic inference-grounded explanatory language models. What these models lack is what I have elsewhere designated as the "grammar of address".[41] Inference is not contingent upon the agency of automatons. Signification depends on the intersubjective use and evolution of semantic tokens. The grammar address consists in a unique challenge to both empirical science and philosophy. It comes down to the disruptive presence of that which calls and names – in other words, what the Jewish philosopher Levinas characterized as the "call of the Other". Pragmatically, such a "call" happens when the

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[39] Sellars writes: "One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims -- particular and general -- about the world. It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only non-inferential, but as presupposing no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general. It might be thought that this is a redundancy, that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth." Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 68-9.
[40] *Critique of Pure Reason*, op. cit., 193-4.
[41] See Carl Raschke, "The Deposition of the Sign: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Religious Studies," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 3 (Winter 2001):1, https://www.jcrt.org/archives.html. Accessed November 8, 2024. A more extensive exposition of this concept can be found in Carl Raschke, *The Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event* (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Pres, 2011), 109-118.

solicitation of another subject intrudes into, or intersects with, our own subjectivity, when the self-certainty of "I" that differentiates itself "transcendentally" from the flotsam and jetsam of our temporal experience is put into question at the very moment another says "you", or calls us by name.

We thus return to the deeper implications of Davidson's thesis. The notion of *deixis* in the field of semantics points to the more overarching implications of such a thesis. Deixis connotes the marking of the relative location of speaker and addressee in relation to each other. It brings to the fore the recognition that meaning is always dependent on context, but the context itself cannot be divorced from the *who* of certain utterances.[42] The grammar of address confounds so-called "truth tables" in logic, because to speak truth there must be mutual trust in what each of us is saying to *each other*. "Truth" is etymologically derived from the archaic English word "troth", which means mutual fidelity (as in the term "betrothed"). According to Levinas, it is the call of the Other, the address of that mysterious personal presence known as "you" to the "I", that grabs our attention, often in the process of calling us out by name, that confers meaning in most circumstances. The Other is recognized as irreducibly different and beyond full comprehension. The subject experiences a total responsibility towards the Other, even if they are a stranger. The Other's face, according to Levinas, represents their subjecthood and unknowability, introducing an irreducible exteriority to the subject's experience. By Levinas' reckoning it is the infinite in "the face of the other" through the mode of presence that bestows a moment of concrete signification.[43] The "orthogonal" intervention of the Other's presence transforms the age-old *philosophical preoccupation of "that which is" (Aristotle's todi ti) into "who are you?", the fabric of dialogical* encounter. *Ontology becomes heterology*, the "science" of alterity of the Other. God, or the divine, calls us as he did to Moses on the mountain,

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[42] See, for examples, Charles Fillmore, *Lectures on Deixis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Keith Green (ed.), *New Essays in Deixis: Discourse, Narrative, Literature* (The Hague: CIP Gegevns, 1995); Dieter Wunderlich, "Pragmatik, Sprechsituation, Deixis, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 1(1971): 153; *Hardarik Blühdorn, Linguistiche Berichte* 156 (1995): 109-142.

[43] "It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself. This does not mean that my existence is constituted in the thought of the others. An existence called objective, such as is reflected in the thought of the others, and by which I count in universality, in the State, in history, in the totality, does not express me, but precisely dissimulates me. The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response-acuteness of the present--engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality. This extreme attention does not actualize what was in potency, for it is not conceivable without the other. Being attentive signifies a surplus of consciousness, and presupposes the call of the other. To be attentive is to recognize the mastery of the other, to receive his command, or, more exactly, to receive from him the command to command." Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 177.

and names us, as he did to Jacob on his night of vision. That is what the cognitive theory of religion refuses to acknowledge.[44]

Levinas terms this orthogonal and non-predicative (perhaps we should say "trans-predicative") mode of signification the "trace", which inheres in the call or address. The trace is bound up with the sense of Infinity as well as with the otherness of the Other. It manifests when we encounter the radical alterity of another person, which goes beyond our perception and cannot be fully grasped or comprehended as some kind of "totalization". The trace orients our cognition toward something that is beyond being and existence. It represents a transcendence that cannot be reduced to immanence or expressed through prevailing concepts. It is what Levinas dubs *autrement qu'être*, "otherwise than being." The call of the Other makes its own semantic *deposit*, or "de-position". Considered from one angle, it signifies an absence. From a different perspective, it draws us toward the One who addresses us and unfolds an infinite panoply of meaning. The trace is what remains after the Other has disappeared or withdrawn. Yet it is not a sign in the conventional sense. On the contrary, it is not, as Greek philosophy put it, a moment of *ousia*, or *entitativeness*. It is an incident of "full disclosure" or p*arousia*, the "fullness" of meaning. This fullness can only mean what we say when we say "you".

The "trace" cannot be captured in any schema of cognitive congruity or empirical representations. It transcends all "language games". The cognitive theory of religion relies on an incremental ordering and re-ordering of these schemas with the aim of correlating them with the symbolic forms and actions that anthropologists routinely map as "religious" practices and belief systems. But the singularity of religious *you-speak*, the intrusion of the divine "calling" and "naming" that separates the Jewish and Greek thought legacies that pervade our theoretical discourse, in its ways calls for a new means of construing the theory of religion in an even vaster scope. As Levinas puts it, "to see the face is to speak of the world".[45] Face and trace replace the familiar *metaphysico-lingustic* problem of the differential *espacement* (in Derrida's sense) of signifier and signified. The logic of predication gives place to the grammar of address. It poses the very question of the *vocative* –

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[44] See my own account of this: "The Derridean trace marked through temporality of the text is the true conjugate of the Levinasian trace of interpersonal responsibility that is deposited by all relational investments in the Other, which is not ontological in the Greek sense, but heterological.This heterological trace arises not from the "grammar" of reading, writing, interpretation, and exposition, but from the very grammar of address that constitutes the intersubjective relationship. It is genuinely the duplex Hebraicum, the two "faces" of Western thought. It is Torah, Law, Word, Scripture — the signature of a singularity behind the philosophical production of signs." *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory*, op. cit., 109.

[45] Levinas, op. cit., 174.

calling out, querying, responding, acknowledging, and so forth.[46] It is the vocative itself that marks what is otherwise known as "alterity", otherness, the Wholly Other (i.e., the "divine"). Generally speaking, it is Levinas' "exteriority". Levinas puts it this way: "the invoked is not what I comprehend: he is not under a category. He is the one to whom I speak -he has only a reference to himself; he has no quiddity." Models of identity are congenitally incapable, let alone grasping, what we mean by the "religious".[47]

It is out of the detritus of a "deconstructed" theory of language and cognition that a new *theoria* – literally a new way of "seeing" in the world – arises. It is a theory that goes beyond what previous iterations of "religious theory" have had to say. All these theories, including the cognitive theory of religion, sociological and anthropological theories, even the time-honored philosophy of religion have been nothing more than clueless henchman of the tyrannical Aristotelian regime of predicative logic. As Heidegger famously and cryptically put it, "language speaks". But language is always spoken to someone. Language is intersubjective, and that is where the real, hidden secrets of religious language can be unraveled.

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[46] "The claim to know and to reach the other is realized in the relationship with the Other that is cast in the relation of language, where the essential is the interpellation, the vocative." Op. cit., 69.
[47] Op. cit.