PART ONE

THE PROMISE OF THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE
OF RELIGION
THE PROMISE OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE FOR THE 
STUDY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY 

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*Mind is the material of history... If history is not a mere puppet show, then it must be the history of mental processes... Those matters which come first in the rational order of things—the cognitive functions of the mind—come last from the standpoint of our awareness and our observation.*

—Georg Simmel (1905: vii, 39, 43)

If, as the German sociologist and philosopher of history Georg Simmel suggested at the beginning of the last century, “the material of history” is—in the phrasing of his English translator—“the cognitive functions of the mind” (“die Erkenntnisfunktion des Geistes”; in the fifth edition of his work, he speaks also of “die psychologische Tatsächlichkeit[en]” [1923: 4]), then history can be defined as the history of mental representations. The history of religions, then, would be the history of representations of superhuman agents—those legions of deities and devils, angels and demons, spirits and saints that inhabit all religious traditions—and of those ideas and practices that have been legitimated by claims to their authority. And since cognitive scientists have now shown that the superhuman inflections of such claims are the products of quite ordinary cognitive functions (Boyer 2001), the history of religions requires no special **heilsgeschichtliche** method (see Simmel 1905: 59; Collingwood 1956: 9; Lease 2003). The methodological problems that confront the historian of religions are, in other words, no different from those that arise in any historical study.

Whereas historians have traditionally been concerned with mapping the influences of historical antecedents and contexts on their evidence, cognitivists are concerned with mapping the influences and constraints of human cognition upon these same data. By understanding mental representations as the products of neurophysiological functions, they join the array of possible material explanations for historical formations alongside, for example, those of geopolitical or economic forces (Boyer 2003; on the materiality of the mental, see also Godelier 1986). The historical record is constrained, in other words, not only by antecedents and exigencies explicit in the environment of brains but also by implicit