TO THE EDITORS:

Volume 9/2 is especially interesting. It seems to have a coherence relative to theoretical subjects that are crucial for the study of religion. I believe that many of our colleagues will find that they are in agreement with a great deal of the content of Volume 9/2. This is, I think, a healthy sign that we are making some theoretical progress in the study of religion. There are a few issues that need clarification, emphasis, or perhaps, recollection. I want to highlight a few of them.

First, we should be grateful to Burhenn for reminding us of the importance of ecology in the study of religion. There are two points, however, that I wish to raise regarding Rappaport’s important contribution to the study of ritual. First, Burhenn is quite right in noting that Rappaport’s theory of ritual is functionalist. Burhenn is quite wrong, however, in thinking that Rappaport’s theory meets “head-on certain philosophical [sic] criticisms of funcntionalism, especially those of Hempel” (117). Hempel’s critique of this theory, as you will recall, is based on an examination of the logic of its premises. Therefore, the quantitative character of a particular study or the manifest or latent functions of the cultural element to be explained are irrelevant to the critique of the premises of the theory. The “origins” of the element we wish to explain are also irrelevant to the critique. Anyone familiar with the history of functionalist theory knows that the major participants fought “origin” theories of culture and religion. Moreover, Hempel’s criticism of functionalism does not entail the suggestion that we should “construe the relationship between environment and ritual deductively” (118). What Hempel does argue is that a causal explanation entails a deductive set of premises, or, at the least, a set of logical premises that entail each other. Functionalists believe that the causal theory answers the question, “why does a specific social element exist?” The theory explains what causes the existence and persistence (not the origin) of such things as ritual, belief, or kinship. The answer has always been, “the satisfaction of some need”. I continue to believe that Hempel’s critique clearly demonstrates that the theory is a failure. Since neither Rappaport nor Burhenn, nor anyone else as far as I know, has met this critique “head-on” the conclusion still stands—functionalism ends in “your guess is as good as mine”.

Burhenn seems to be unaware of the logic of functionalism in his
paraphrase of Rapport, that warfare, "has the ecological effect of redistributing population" (117, italics mine) or in his use of the term "homeostat" in the context of ecosystems (118). The first paraphrase ends in a tautology or an invalid conclusion, the second entails a closed system. Let me repeat that it is functionalists who insist that the explanation is causal, not in the sense of "origin" but in the logical entailment of such assertions as, e.g., "if such and such is present in the system, then as an effect, X is satisfied". What I find disconcerting is the fact that I explicitly pointed out some of the errors of this theory in Impasse and Resolution (1989). In fact, there is a long footnote with specific reference to Burhenn's article, "Functionalism and the Explanation of Religion" at the end of the chapter.

The second point I want to highlight is Burhenn's endorsement of cannibalism. W. Arens has argued that there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of ritual cannibalism and he includes the Aztecs in his book. As far as I can tell his argument still stands. I recommend, The Man Eating Myth (1979). It puts an end to one of the last great Western ethnocentric dogmas about "primitives". Why does the belief persist? Interesting question.

I think most of us agree with what Fitzgerald has to say about the "theological legacy" of the study of religion. Although the legacy is still with us the problem is thoroughly exposed allowing us to move on to other important issues.

I was somewhat disappointed, however, to read that the definition of religion seems to remain one of those issues for Fitzgerald. Overall, I think most of us would agree with what he has to say about this subject. There is just one small point on which he needs to be corrected. He thinks that my definition of religion, "a verbal and non-verbal structure of interaction with superhuman beings", "is wrong" (101). Why? Because, he says, the values that are linked to superhuman beings, such as hierarchy, purity and deference, are "reproduced in all major institutions" (102). Indeed! I agree. My point is this: they are reproduced in other institutions but the structure we focus on called religion, including its semantic field, is quite different from those structures in which the element of "superhuman beings" is absent. All I claim, and I think many would agree, is that what we are interested in are those structures which entail the presence of superhuman beings. I simply do not understand what Fitzgerald means, "If the analysis is demarcated in terms of interactions with superhuman beings then it will tend to remain with some analytically