Mind matters.\(^1\) Emile Durkheim's postulate about the independence of the social from the psychological notwithstanding, recent anthropological thought has increasingly recognized the role of cognition in organizing cultural phenomena. Religious phenomena figure prominently in cognitive anthropological discussions, because religion, in several ways, is a limiting case for anthropological theory. As a result, a considerable body of cognitive theory has developed around religion, and recent years have witnessed the emergence of a distinctly cognitive psychology of religion. In this essay I shall survey the cognitive scientific literature pertaining to religion and summarize the theoretical picture painted in the works reviewed.

The earliest cognitive theory of a religious phenomenon was advanced by Dan Sperber in his prolegomenon to a general theory of symbolism, *Rethinking Symbolism* (1975). Sperber begins by arguing that, despite anthropologists' commitment to the rationality of peoples the world over, it is precisely the irrationality of certain statements and actions that leads the fieldworker to identify those statements and actions as symbolic: "I note then as symbolic all activity where the means put into play seem to me to be clearly disproportionate to the explicit or implicit end, whether this end be knowledge, communication or production – that is to say, all activity whose rationale escapes me" (1975: 4). Sperber thus identifies the problem of symbolism as one of irrationality.

Sperber attacks head-on the wide-spread hypothesis that symbols are made rational by their meanings: symbols enter into no relationship that can be called "meaning". He begins by examining the linguistic criteria for meaning. In order for a term in a natural language to have meaning, it must have two properties: analyticity – the ability to be broken up into constituent conceptual primitives without loss of sense – and paraphrase – the ability to be replaced by another term without loss of sense. Symbols do not have these properties, so they cannot be said to have meaning in the linguistic sense of the term.

\(^1\) This review essay was made possible in part by a grant from the Department of Comparative Religion in the College of Arts and Sciences, Western Michigan University.
The notion of “meaning”, however, may be broadened to a semiotic or information-theoretic sense, such that terms have meaning if they can be linked to meanings in some kind of code. The problem here is that there are no codes. Even if the codes were hidden, the property of only an initiated few, the problem would remain entirely: the majority of people would still use symbols without understanding their meanings. Nor could the code merely be unconscious: the criteria advanced by Freud (and others) for delimiting the symbolic code are not coextensive and therefore do not delimit any field of meanings. Symbols do not have meaning in a semiotic sense. Semiotic analyses are themselves a symbolic activity, in which the problem of symbolism is not solved but aggravated.

Similarly, structuralist analyses do not show what symbols mean: though structuralism does make explicit the relationships between symbols, the relationships are not ones of “meaning”. Having exhausted all of the standard accounts of symbolic meaning, Sperber concludes that symbols do not mean at all.

Rather than approaching symbolism by analogy to language, Sperber treats symbolism as a form of knowledge. He divides memory into two types: semantic and encyclopedic. Semantic knowledge is knowledge about the extension of categories, such as the range of objects to which the term “bear” might be applied. Encyclopedic knowledge is knowledge about the world: the knowledge that bears eat fish, hibernate, come in various sizes, etc. Sperber argues that symbolic knowledge is encyclopedic knowledge of an unusual representational format. Symbols, rather than having normal encyclopedic entries, are represented instead as propositions in quotes, such as “‘p’ is true”, where p is a symbolic proposition. For example, the symbolic proposition, “The circle is true”, would be cognitively represented in the form, “‘The circle is true’ is true”. Because of this format, symbolic knowledge, as part of encyclopedic knowledge, is knowledge about knowledge, e.g., the knowledge that “The circle is true” is true. The commentary that accompanies symbols is itself frequently symbolic, so these representations may contain multiple layers of embedded propositions, e.g., “‘p is the word of God’ is true”, where p is itself a symbolic proposition such as “On the third day Jesus was raised from the dead”.

This theory that symbols are represented as propositions in quotes often accompanied by commentary (itself symbolic) receives support from four considerations: (1) it explains how human beings can display both rational and irrational behaviour; (2) it clarifies the relationship between beliefs and figures (figures differ from beliefs in the commentary assigned to them); (3) it shows how symbolic commentary may itself be symbolic; and (4) it distinguishes between symbolic knowledge and other encyclopedic knowledge.