Cognition, capitalism, and causality:  
A report on the NAASR/SSSR panels,  
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This is the third year in which the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) has organized sessions in association with the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). Two of these sessions, those on cognition and causality, were continuations of discussions begun at the SSSR meeting last year in St. Louis. The NAASR panels on Religion, Cognition, and Ideology were noted in the SSSR Newsletter (December 1995) as one of the “highlights” of that meeting.

Two sections on “Cognitive approaches to religion”, organized by E. Thomas Lawson (Western Michigan University), featured presentations of continuing research on the cognitive relationship between ritual and memory by Robert McCauley (Emory University), on the cognitive constraints on sacred texts by Brian Malley (University of Michigan), on religious syncretism by Timothy Light (Western Michigan University) and on cultural transmission by Justin Barrett (Cornell University). Among other things, this session was noteworthy because of its interdisciplinary participation by a philosopher (McCauley), a linguist (Light), a psychologist (Barret) and an anthropologist (Malley). Malley’s conclusion that he was simply trying to demonstrate that the production of religious culture shares the same cognitive conditions and constraints as any cultural production effectively summarizes the fundamental import of all four presentations in these exciting sessions.

A panel organized by Russell McCutcheon (Southwest Missouri State University) on “Late capitalism arrives on campus” addressed issues related to the present job market in religious studies as well as the position that many departments now find themselves in given current budget constraints. The collective conclusions of the panelists were characterized by one of the participants as “depressing”. Brian Malley, a graduate student, spoke of how he had gone from completing an M.A. in religious studies to pursuing a Ph.D. in what he understands to be the related fields of anthropology and psychology, at least in part because of the bleak job prospects in religious studies. Darlene Juschka, finishing her doctoral studies in religion at the University of Toronto, described the two to six year wait following the com-
pletion of a Ph.D. that is characteristic of our field before a job is found. She noted further that programs such as women's studies, ethnic studies and religious studies were especially vulnerable to educational "downsizing" because of their rather recent creation. Gustavo Benavides (Villanova University), invoking the European "gymnasium model", suggested that we might place some unemployed Ph.D.s in high schools, thus "turning the high schools into universities rather than universities into high schools", while Charlie Reynolds, chair of the religious studies department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, noted that an experiment along these lines was already being undertaken by his university. Warren Frisina, Associate Executive Director of the AAR, and Charlie Reynolds, in his other role as President of the CSSR, responded by noting that many of the problems that currently beset religious studies are characteristic of academia generally. Frisina urged departments of religion not to retreat into their "ivory towers" but to pay attention to the needs of their "clientele": students, administrators, and the public. In a suggestion that provoked the most critical responses, Frisina spoke of the desirability of "increased theological reflection in higher education". Although such an increase might create a number of new jobs for the largely theologically oriented membership of the AAR, Frisina declined to comment on those which might be lost from public colleges and universities as a consequence of such an initiative. The presentations to this panel will be published in a forthcoming issue of the CSSR Bulletin.

In their panel on "Two perspectives on religion as a causal force", Daniel Krymkowski and Luther Martin (University of Vermont) reiterated the major points of their paper from last year's SSSR meeting: that in much sociology of religion research, the theoretical and empirical bases for viewing "religion" as an independent variable are very weak. If any appeal is made to theory, it is often to Weber who, at best, is ambiguous concerning religion as cause. A spirited reply to Krymkowski and Martin was offered by Darren Sherket, a sociologist of religion from Vanderbilt, who sought to demonstrate from his own research a causal relationship between religion and educational attainment, religion and political protest in the sixties and seventies, religion and political values generally, and religion and fertility decisions. Though Sherket was able to demonstrate a statistical correlation between religion and other domains within a common cultural context, Krymkowski and Martin remained unconvinced that any causal relationship had been demonstrated. The two respondents to the discussion, Donald Ploch (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) and Wade Clark Roof (University of California, Santa Barbara), both reminisced about their own early commitment to and later disillusionment with arguments based solely upon statistical correlations and argued for the desirability of more theoretical re-