

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPLIT HYPOTHESIS OF RELIGION

A mystic is just a man trying to think like a dog.

Gerald Edelman

The proposed origins and functions of religion vary widely. Anthropologist Stewart Guthrie (1980) said, “Anthropology and other humanistic studies lack an adequate theory of religion. [They] have found no single paradigm. No theory or even definition of religion is generally accepted.” (p. 181) Thirty-five years after Guthrie wrote this, little has changed. There is no consensus whether religion evolved by natural selection and is in our genes or is strictly a cultural phenomenon. Does religion serve a necessary purpose or is it an accidental byproduct of habits of mind, the mental residue left over from other behaviors that are important for human survival? A theory for the purpose of religion remains as elusive as ever. Considering the importance religion has had for most people, it’s quite perplexing that explanations remain wanting.

Guthrie lists several historical theories of religion including anthropomorphizing the world; attempting to explain and control the world; not explaining the world by contradicting experience; constructing an ultimately reasonable universe; forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate condition of his existence; or wish-

fulfillment to name a few. (pp. 182-183) The theories that have received the most widespread attention recently are to assuage the fear of death, to answer the existential mysteries, to provide group cohesion, and the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device. I will explore them in more detail later, but even that won't help. They all describe aspects of religious behavior or belief and have legitimacy. All have serious shortcomings, and all are inadequate to comprehensively account for religious phenomena. None adequately explain how religion is adaptive and improves evolutionary fitness.

It seems as if any theory can be made to seem reasonable and describe some phenomenon, and it's certainly the case with religion. Like many aspects of the social sciences, the foundational assumptions for religion are insufficient. Anthropologist Scott Atran says, "You can find functional explanations [for religion] and their contraries, and they're all true." (Glausiusz, 2003) It's like swimming in mud. There's a lot of arm waving but not a lot of movement.

Religion is difficult to define and means many things to many people. For modern secularists religion has ugly connotations: it's a psychological crutch—the opiate of the masses—or a means of manipulation. The social form of religion is the accumulation of the combined spiritual sensibility of a group of people into a formalized and ritualized program. Collections of individuals sharing similar beliefs and doctrines constitute organized religions, which have been responsible for an astonishing amount of persecution, suffering, and death and are rightly to be distrusted or approached with caution. Here, however, religion is strictly about its effect and meaning on the individual rather than on the social group. In one sense this can be thought of as spirituality: the sensation of the sacred, transcendence, and the feeling of external powers that influence us, but whether called religion or spirituality, it begins with the individual. This book is about why humans engage in and benefit from *experiential* religion. As both a practicing Catholic and Hindu monk, Wayne Teasdale (2001) says religion arises from a deep, personal wellspring.

For thousands of years before the dawn of the world religions as social organisms working their way through history, the mystical life thrived. This mystical tradition, which underpins all genuine faith, is the living source of religion itself. It is the attempt to possess the inner reality of the spiritual life, with its mystical, or direct, access to the divine. (pp. 10-11)

People in all cultures witness or experience this sense of religious rapture to varying degrees. In these chapters, religion refers to ritual religious practices and their effects on the person. It is in this context that we look at how religion evolved. Once confident that we understand how religion is adaptive and why it exists (which certainly isn't the case yet), then we can investigate its social nature. That, however, is not within the scope of this work.

What's needed is to take a step back and consider an idea that looks beyond the above-mentioned proposals and wraps a theoretical umbrella around all intrinsic religion, the personal feeling of the spiritual. I propose The Split Hypothesis of religion. Succinctly, intrinsic religion is a compensating mechanism for higher-order consciousness. Early in human evolution as Homo brains enlarged, developing human cognition divided into two paths: higher-order consciousness took one path, and religious behaviors evolved as a different path to suppress or allay higher-order consciousness, but they were essentially two projections from the same source.

Support for The Split Hypothesis requires three legs of a stool to stand. The first leg is consciousness, or more exactly what consciousness is not. While our understanding of consciousness is still sketchy, much brain biology over the last several decades has shown that consciousness—self-awareness and volition—is not the controlling executive that many believe it to be. By far most of our behavior is driven by unconscious automatic systems. The following three chapters deal with various aspects of human consciousness. Chapter 4 in particular examines the pitfalls of consciousness and why it needs to be subdued.

The second leg of the stool is the role of emotion. In their paper *The Neural Substrates of Religious Experience*, UCLA physicians Jeffrey

Saver and John Rabin (1997) propose a unifying hypothesis: emotions are the one constant of all religious experience. They aren't the first to understand that emotions are the integrating thread and physiological manifestation of religion. People have long recognized the role of emotions in religious behavior. Indeed, a quick review of theory of religion books and articles reveals that emotion underlies all the theories. Recent studies suggest that some ritual behaviors—making or listening to music for example—stimulate the brain's reward centers deep in the limbic system, the seat of emotions. (Blood and Zatorre, 2001; Panksepp, 1995) Emotions are evolved systems that ensure our survival. Religion stimulates our emotions and suppresses self-aware or narrative consciousness. This is to say religion evolved biologically, is adaptive, and the propensity for religion is inherited and in our genes. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore shortcomings of the existing origin of religion theories, the biological purpose of emotions, and the relationship between emotions, ritual, and religion.

The third leg of the stool is the five ritual behaviors: music, dance, art, mythology, and prayer. Rituals are the behaviors of religion and have several aspects in common: they are seemingly non-utilitarian, are first observed historically in ancient tribal religions, are ubiquitous in all cultures, and all elicit emotions. Religious rituals are behavioral adaptations that inhibit consciousness and prompt emotions. The last part of the book looks at each of these ritual behaviors to show how they each act to reduce the conscious cacophony and enhance evolutionary fitness and success.

The first part of The Split Hypothesis focuses on the problem of consciousness as it is critical to my argument. The scientific evidence is plentiful and compelling, but won't convince those who believe with a religious-like fervor that consciousness has only a beneficial contribution to *Homo sapiens*. The studies of many neuroscientists and other academics are cited to substantiate all claims, but in this introductory chapter, The Split Hypothesis of religion is fleshed out with allegory, metaphor, and only a little science.

Does a frog have higher-order consciousness? Does it have self-awareness and can it access a vast array of short- and long-term

memories for complex cognitive evaluation? Does it have any of the characteristics associated with higher-order consciousness such as the ability to use symbols or imagine what someone else is thinking—a theory of mind? No, a frog doesn't have that kind of consciousness. So what is it like to be a frog, to be without self-awareness? It's hard to imagine. Since we all have consciousness, how do we envision the absence of it? It's like asking someone not to think about holding a pen. Consider that the lack of consciousness is like your consciousness before you were born, even before you were conceived. Remember that? Unless you can recall previous lives, you don't remember anything; it's a big, black blank. It's not void, as that implies an empty space. It simply doesn't exist at all. In the computer programming world, it's called null, meaning the absence of anything. That's what the consciousness of a frog is like. The frog is completely capable of surviving and reproducing, driven by its genetics and its telencephalon forebrain that gives it its learning potential. The frog brain is wired to be capable of a limited amount of learning, but consciousness doesn't enter into how a frog learns. When the frog's ecosystem changes beyond a certain range, the frog is toast. Its ability to migrate to better climes is limited. It can't dig for underground water in a drought. It can't modify its environment within its own lifetime. For most of the animal kingdom, this lack of consciousness is the standard. Although some birds and mammals might have glimmers of consciousness, the vast majority of animal species are null for higher-order or awareness consciousness.

On the other hand, what is it about human consciousness that makes us so special? Despite the once common assertion that humans were the only animals to have language, to make and use tools, and have a vast memory capacity including remembering a personal past, it is now clear many mammals and birds are capable of at least some of these capabilities. Nothing about humans is strictly unique. While the overall accumulation of these features contributes to (purported) human exceptionalism, there is a more germane way of identifying what makes humans different, and that is the ability to decouple information and to create metarepresentations. Simply, this means humans can generate and retain conditional information.

Humans can adapt their behavior based on local conditions and pass those behaviors to their offspring through learning. This is the basis of culture. Longtime collaborators Leda Cosmides and John Tooby (2000a) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, describe it this way. “Arguably, one central and distinguishing innovation in human evolution has been the dramatic increase in the use of contingent information for the regulation of improvised behavior that is successfully tailored to local conditions.” (p. 53)

To a degree humans are freed or decoupled from their reliance and dependence on the instructions in their genome—instincts—to survive. This new human cognitive niche that I refer to under the umbrella term of higher-order consciousness provides mechanisms that enable metarepresentations—the ability, for example, to hold for evaluation both true and false ideas and to simultaneously weigh various factors such as another person’s reliability and reputation when integrating messages or the likelihood of being within an arrow’s reach of striking prey. Contrast that to the hunting strategy of a big cat who slowly stalks its prey until a critical point when it makes the decision to pounce or sprint. It is unlikely that the cat considers other options beyond the perceived distance to its prey into its decision-making such as type of terrain or availability of the prey’s escape route. Cosmides and Tooby call this limited mental scope of other animals naive realism.

For the naive realist, the world as it is mentally represented is taken for the world as it really is, and no distinction is drawn between the two...From our external perspective, we can say of such basic architectures that all information found inside the system is assumed to be true, or is treated as true. However, from the point of view of the architecture itself, that would not be correct, for it would imply that the system is capable of drawing the distinction between true and false, and is categorizing the information as true. Instead, mechanisms in the architecture simply use the information found inside the system to regulate behavior and to carry out further computations. Whatever information is present in

the system simply is “reality” for the architecture. Instead of tagging information as true or false—as seems so obvious to us—such basic architectures would not be designed to store false information. When new information is produced that renders old information obsolete, the old information is updated, overwritten, forgotten, or discarded...For this reason, there is no need in such an architecture to be able to represent that some information is true: Its presence, or the decision to store it or remember it, is the cue to its reliability. In such a design, true equals accessible. (p. 60)

This is the frog mind in which perceptions are handled in an essentially automatic way, and there are no alternative options for behavioral outcomes. The true-false dichotomy simply doesn’t exist for the frog, so in this null condition, there can be no evaluation or judgment. The frog is hard-wired unlike humans where choices exist. This is the *gift* of higher-order consciousness.

Fall From Grace

First God made heaven and earth the Bible starts out. The earth was without form and void (null?), and darkness was upon the face of the deep. In only a page or two, God created the rest of the world, including animals and humans. He put the first people in Eden, the paradise where everything was in perfect harmony. The Garden of Eden was described as a place of purity where there was no judgment, no right or wrong. Adam and Eve, who were naked, were not ashamed because they had no knowledge of shame. Theirs was a state of innocence because, like other animals, they were without knowledge or consciousness.

Just as some people rationalize the six days of creation as a metaphor for the evolution of the cosmos including life on earth, the Garden represents a metaphorical, closed-eyed, nonconscious unity, a oneness representing the state of animal existence without consciousness. Think of the Garden as symbolizing the state of instinct or frog preconsciousness. The serpent told Eve that eating

the fruit would open her eyes, and she would be like God knowing good and evil. Eating from the tree of knowledge and getting cast out of the Garden is the evolutionary transition from the pre-conscious to dichotomous consciousness in which there exists the tension of opposites—in and out, good and evil, heaven and hell. Essentially the rest of Bible, and religions in general, are attempts to reconcile the opposites. It may be thought of as the desire to return to the blissful state of unawareness or nonconsciousness, or at least to ameliorate the strain created by consciousness to solve the problems of survival that originally belonged exclusively to instinct.

Psychologist Carl Jung (1933) was keenly aware of this psychic conflict. In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, he summed up the human condition.

It is the growth of consciousness which we must thank for the existence of problems; they are the dubious gift of civilization. It is just man's turning away from instinct—his opposing himself to instinct—that creates consciousness...As long as we are still submerged in nature we are unconscious, and we live in the security of instinct that knows no problems. Everything in us that still belongs to nature shrinks away from a problem; for its name is doubt, and wherever doubt holds sway, there is uncertainty and the possibility of divergent ways. And where several ways seem possible, there we have turned away from the certain guidance of instinct and handed over to fear. For consciousness is now called upon to do that which nature has always done for her children—namely, to give a certain, unquestionable and unequivocal decision. And here we are beset by an all-too-human fear that consciousness—our Promethean conquest—may in the end not be able to serve us in the place of nature. (p. 110)

The original sin was the human acquisition of awareness consciousness, which separated us from frog nonconscious unity and gave us the capabilities of God-like knowledge. Consciousness also gave humans the angst of contradictions inherent in the awareness

of opposites. Before consciousness, animals lived without the ability to hold complex concepts and thoughts. They did not have the capacity to consider more than one or two conflicting scenarios; any decisions that had to be made were essentially automatic choices. For an animal there was no good and bad. There was only the singular constant of nonconscious existence without judgment.

Professor of Religious History Mircea Eliade (1975) took a similar approach towards the religious connection to human origins. Eliade understood that religion developed at the beginning of human time, or as he referred to it, *in illo tempore*, literally “at that time,” meaning the specific event, but indeterminate time in the past, when people fell from grace. He also used the less than politically correct term of “savages” for pre-literate peoples but understood that they, too, shared the same mental experiences as us moderns.

The savages, for their own part, were also aware of having lost a primitive paradise. In the modern jargon, we may say that the savages regarded themselves, neither more nor less than if they had been Western Christians, as beings in a “fallen” condition, by contrast with a fabulously happy situation in the past. Their actual condition was not their original one: it had been brought about by a catastrophe that had occurred *in illo tempore*. Before that disaster, man had enjoyed a life which was not dissimilar from that of Adam before he sinned. (p. 43)

Present time, which Eliade called profane time, was of little consequence compared to what he called sacred time when humanity was born. It was the religious act through ritual that was the universal requirement all humans must perform to symbolically return to the beginning time. People have the drive to return to the sacred time, which they do through ritual religious practices.

Among all these paleo-agricultural peoples, the essential duty is the periodic invocation of the primordial event which inaugurated the present condition of humanity. All their religious life is a commemoration, a re-memorising. The Remembrance, reenacted

ritually—therefore, by the repetition of the primordial assassination—plays the decisive part: one must take the greatest care not to forget what happened *in illo tempore*.
(p. 45)

People cannot disdain their past as the need to remember is part of their genetic heritage. What the religious ritual attempts to do is metaphorically recall or relive the original condition of humanity, the primordial Split or fall from grace, to connect us to a time incipient to consciousness where the innocence of perfect oneness resides in frog blank blackness, and instinct is the arbiter of behavior.

From this interpretation of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, one might get the notion that consciousness is a bad thing. Optimistically, the best I can say is that consciousness is a mixed bag. The study of mental consciousness has turned out to be very daunting. There is no consciousness center of the brain, so besides the challenge of identifying the neurophysiology of consciousness, scientists struggle to agree what the function and purpose of consciousness are. A definition or understanding of consciousness remains elusive, and although I examine some theories and proposed functions of consciousness, I'm not providing a strict definition. Rather, in order to evaluate the interrelationship between consciousness and religion, I examine various behaviors that tend to be associated with consciousness. Topics include choice and decision-making, logic or rational thought, memory, attention and awareness, and volitional intention—free will.

Even though the scientific knowledge of how consciousness works remains fragmentary, brain researchers are discovering that what we do know about consciousness is not what most of us think it is. People have the sense that they are in control of their lives and moment to moment decide intentionally what to do next. It isn't quite so straightforward. Our perception and feeling of consciousness is very different from the actual conscious and cognitive processes themselves and is to a degree illusory. Because it smacks directly into people's most fervent beliefs and desires about themselves, it's very difficult for many to accept. The evidence that our conscious volition is not what motivates us is actually quite com-

pelling and comes from several areas of study. People who suffer localized brain damage lose specific functionality, which often reveals how neural operations work independently of rational or thinking tasks. Also, direct stimulation of brain structures reveals how pathways carry information that doesn't reach awareness consciousness yet still has impact. Cognitive psychologists are able to design experiments that isolate factors influencing behavior. What they find is that it's quite easy to manipulate people unconsciously through various subtle and not so subtle cues. It happens every day, for example, when someone's emotions affect another's emotions.

Our behavior is not subject to real-time conscious introspection or control. Neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran (2004) says on the first page of *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness*, "Your conscious life, in short, is nothing but an elaborate post-hoc rationalization of things you do for other reasons." (p. 1) By far most human behavior is like the behavior of other animals, driven by unconscious emotions, out of sight and out of our conscious mind. Most of consciousness is like the TV sports announcer describing the play you've already seen. It's nice to have the analysis of what's already taken place, but it doesn't change what happened. Consciousness is trailing behind, watching the activity of the emotional unconscious and pestering, "Don't forget me; listen, I have something to say here." We are aware of the sustained chatter, the internal discussion that goes on in our heads. That's consciousness doing its job, checking in, monitoring events, always observing and commenting. Consciousness evolved to constantly query and offer assistance, but the brain chatter can be annoying and, in some cases, even misguided. The next chapters explore the inconsistent role of consciousness in human activity.

In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) begin with the premise that our mental processes are almost wholly unconscious. After listing several unconscious behaviors necessary to hold a conversation, they say, "Cognitive scientists have shown experimentally that to understand even the simplest utterance, we must perform these and other incredibly complex forms of thought automatically and without effort below the level of consciousness. It is not merely that we occasionally do not notice these processes; rather, they are inaccessible to conscious awareness and

control." (p. 11) Instead of the common belief that the unconscious exists in relation to consciousness, it is innate unconscious neural processes that are incipient, and consciousness is a Johnny-come-lately, both evolutionarily as well as contemporaneously.

Evolutionary changes to the human brain dictate that instinctual behaviors relinquish some control of the organism to learning—functions that are flexible and can modify behavior in an individual's lifetime. However, this capacity that humans excel in did not evolve to replace pre-existing cognition, only to complement it. The seemingly limitless choices humans are capable of, if not curbed, are sources of grief according to anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1971).

The very intelligence that makes it possible for men to learn and behave according to any set of conventions makes them understand that the particular set of conventions by which they do live, and which often inconveniences them or even subjects them to hardship, is arbitrary. Since this is the case, they may be aware that there are, at least logically, alternatives. But no society, if it is to avoid chaos, can allow all alternatives to be practiced. For each context or situation, all but one or a few must be proscribed and the proscriptions must somehow be made effective. Thus human societies are faced with containing what Bergson called the "dissolving power" of their intelligence. (p. 32)

Endless choice is not a good thing. People find it very difficult to function if they have to make conscious decisions about every aspect of their lives and can easily get overwhelmed. Humans simply aren't designed to have to frequently weigh options. No animal is. A little bit of consciousness is a nice-to-have, but too much is a burden. You don't want to consider your options when the bear is coming after you. That's when the evolutionarily ancient fight or flight response, an emotional reaction, kicks in and overrides any conscious ruminations. The Homo sapiens who thought about his predicament too long didn't leave offspring.

The problem of having contingent or conditional information is that we humans are freed to consider infinite possibilities. With our

higher-order consciousness, we are able to perceive and consider any alternative that we could imagine, but that potentially results in immense numbers of options. Cosmides and Tooby (2000a) elaborate.

The costs and difficulties of the [human] cognitive niche are so stringent that only the one lineage, in four billion years, has wandered into the preconditions that favored the evolution of this form of intelligence...One of the greatest problems faced by natural computational systems is...combinatorial explosion, [which] is the term for the fact that alternatives multiply with devastating rapidity in computational systems, and the less constrained the representational and procedural possibilities, the faster this process mushrooms. When this happens, the system is choked with too many possibilities to search among or too many processing steps to perform. (p. 56)

There is an ongoing tension between our innate drives and the persistence of our consciousness. While we have freedom to consider alternatives, we also have to shoulder the burden that consciousness has no absolute answers to offer. At least some of the anxiety and alienation of modern times are the result of having too much choice and no essential knowledge with which to make decisions. There is no fundamental truth or reality accessible solely to consciousness, no pure objectivity or rationality. It remains within the purview of unconscious emotions to make the decisions. Everything good about our species that we believe derives from consciousness—our superior memory and thinking, our taming of the land, our rich culture and technology—comes at a cost. We are afraid of dying, we question our purpose in life, we agonize over our decisions. We have gnawing existential anxiety because we have consciousness. In a world without consciousness, ignorance is bliss.

The Split

Now it's a funny thing about Darwinian evolution. We tend to think of it as a one-way street in which organisms progress and improve as natural selection whittles away the less fit. Rather, evolution should be thought of as a series of compromises. Competition for survival and reproductive success is a never-ending struggle, and evolution continually rolls the dice, experimenting with different combinations of genes (genotypes) and characteristics (phenotypes). Whoever survives and reproduces has won the short-term evolutionary battle. In no way, however, should that suggest that any one of those winning organisms is ideally adapted to its environment. It just happens to be good enough at that moment to pass its genes to the next generation.

A classic example is the compromise between upright walking and childbirth. Anthropologists Karen Rosenberg and Wenda Trevathan (2003) state, "The complex twists and turns that human babies make as they travel through the birth canal have troubled humans and their ancestors for at least 100,000 years." (p. 82) This is because bipedalism required significant changes to the pelvis. Instead of being designed to support just the rear portion of the body like in chimps, the pelvis now supports the entire weight of the head and torso. On top of that, the selection pressure for a great oversized brain pushes the cranium to grow larger in utero. This makes childbirth riskier in humans than in other mammals. This evolutionary compromise is like Newton's third law of motion: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The evolutionary pressures to select upright gait and brain size come at the expense of facile childbirth. "It's the price we pay for our large brains and intelligence." (p. 82) To endanger both the fetus and mother through the increased risk of childbirth for the benefits of a larger brain and upright locomotion mean that bipedalism and large brains are extremely important to human evolutionary success.

The fallen condition of humanity is the strain between our newly acquired consciousness and the nonconscious emotional systems that served our ancestors for hundreds of millions of years. Again, Cosmides and Tooby (2000a) weigh in.

When hominids evolved or elaborated adaptations that could use information based on relationships that were only “true” temporarily, locally, or contingently rather than universally and stably, this opened up a new and far larger world of potential information than was available previously. Context-dependent information could now be used to guide behavior to a far greater extent than had been possible formerly. This advance, however, was purchased at a cost: The exploitation of this exploding universe of potentially representable information creates a vastly expanded risk of possible misapplications, in which information that may be usefully descriptive in a narrow arena of conditions is false, misleading, or harmful outside the scope of those conditions...Expanding the body of information used to make decisions is harmful or dangerous if the architecture does not and cannot detect and keep track of which information is applicable where, and how the boundaries of applicability shift. (pp. 57-58)

Cosmides and Tooby identify a number of adaptations that evolved in response to this cognitive conflict to limit potentially runaway consciousness, which they label with names such as attitude slot, source tag, credal value, and restricted scope of inferences. An equally valid way of looking at these adaptations is as examples of evolved compensating mechanisms. This is what makes us uniquely human: the decoupled brain capable of metarepresentations, what amounts to higher-order consciousness, and limitations to corral this mental capacity. The evolution of our great brain brought as much risk as benefit.

However, an adaptation they didn’t identify that developed as a compensating mechanism to offset the downside of consciousness was intrinsic religion. At a critical juncture in human evolution, a cognitive Split occurred in which religion arose to offset the brain’s decoupling from strict instinctual dictates. The early decoupled mind began to flounder due to newfound powers that it couldn’t handle and control. Aspects of this new mode of cognition based

on contingent information, the ability to form metarepresentations, gave humans great new advantages to manipulate their environment, but the way in which evolution implemented this solution was messy and problematic. Religion confined or retarded this wild child brain and caused humans to reconnect with the prevailing innate prescriptions that had worked for animals since nervous systems first evolved. It's the equal and opposite reaction of Newton's Third Law again. Religion evolved because those who, through their religious behaviors, reined in consciousness and maintained reliance on their emotional instincts—or at least kept a balance between the two—survived and reproduced preferentially. In chapter 4 we'll look at specific drawbacks from a consciousness perspective rather than a decoupling and metarepresentation perspective.

The word religion derives from the Latin *religio*, which some interpret to mean that which attaches, retains, or binds, perhaps a moral bond. For many atheists and secularists, the bondage concept is apt as they find organized religion burdensome and manipulative. But Jung (1990) interpreted the etymology of religion in a different way. "This original form of *religio* ('linking back') is the essence, the working basis of all religious life even today, and always will be." (p. 160) Linking back is revisiting instinctual emotions *in illo tempore*. Consciousness must be restrained and brought face-to-face with our primordial nature. Inner religious behavior is an attempt to honor one's innate emotional spirit.

Our animal nature remains foremost despite our obscenely big craniums, and this explains why religion is a biological, evolved adaptation. Our biology makes us who we are, and anything that dissuades or confounds our innate guidance is a potential threat to our well-being and survival. Consciousness has immense value, but it also has the tendency to interfere with our instinctual nature and throw us off track. It can only secondarily provide the guidance for continued evolutionary success. Our emotional genetic inheritance is the first line of defense.

Splitori

The expression of religious fervor takes many forms, but there are conspicuous consistencies in the way in which people practice intense spiritual passion. Whether from the faiths of the East like Hinduism and Buddhism, the self-help books filling libraries and bookstores, or the Jewish Kabbalists, the Muslim Sufis, or the Christian mystics, the language of deep religion is strikingly similar. In all traditions, the spiritual journey describes a process for reaching a sacred union, oneness, the absolute, the infinite, nirvana. One achieves this state by extinguishing ego consciousness—losing the self, one's boundaries, or material craving. The passage to the spirit world means letting go of the tangible world. The mystical mind achieves a state of perfect understanding, clarity, and rapture devoid of the perception of time and space. Reaching the sacred bestows a sense of immortality and connection. Lluis Oviedo (2009), Theological Anthropologist at the Pontifical University Antonianum in Italy, throws a unifying definition around it. He says religious experience,

Means a perception, feeling, and communication with a sphere beyond the actual empirical reality (transcendence). This is distinct from what is fully present in the empirical world (immanence). Religious experience proclaims the existence of a reality distinct from the empirical reality that can constrain or inspire specific human behaviors. (p. 1)

This is not dissimilar to how Eliade structured his philosophy of religion for whom there are two primary components: the sacred and the profane. This dichotomy of sacred or transcendent versus immanent or profane is akin to The Split between higher-order consciousness and religious behavior. All religious traditions have exercises that result in the mitigation of consciousness. Besides the five ritual behaviors that will be discussed in later chapters—music, dance, visual art, mythology, and prayer—there are various forms of trances and ecstasies used to enter rapturous altered states. To attain these states people endure deprivations such as fasting,

rites of passage, self-mutilation or flagellation, and other forms of penance. In some cultures sex is used formally to achieve a spiritual experience. Meditation and yoga are popular exercises to step away from the conscious-heavy, hectic rat race through a refocus away from consciousness. All these methods are means to conceal or repress higher-order consciousness and mollify the tension of opposites. These religious experiences express the same thing—by silencing consciousness, self-awareness, and the knowledge of opposites, one can achieve the sense of the sacred, the state before human time when we lived in frog null blankness and unconscious instincts ruled. Without consciousness there is no I, no thou, no top or bottom, no life or death. Without consciousness there is only the all-encompassing unity that is without form. Psychologist and author Robert Ornstein (1997) says,

This is why some of the techniques of the spiritual efforts are described as “not for your mind,” or are held by others to be “anti-rational.” The aim is in the simulation of a new kind of mental configuration...Even the very different forms of meditation serve this purpose: They are nonverbal, or they use music, or they are movement oriented. The meditation method most often used consists of silently repeating or chanting a phrase over and over, or of concentrating on one object not only to become relaxed but also to turn off the normal internal talk, lessening the hold of the verbal mode. (p. 164)

Transcendence, the catch-all term for deep religious experience, is popularly considered to be an effort to achieve higher consciousness, but with only a little imagination, we can reinterpret this aspiration quite differently: as obfuscating an excessively busy, overreaching consciousness. Andrew Newberg (2002), a neuroscientist who scans and studies the brains of people praying or meditating and is the author of several books about religion and belief, says, “No matter what specific methods any given tradition of mysticism might employ, the purpose of these methods is almost always the same: to silence the conscious mind and free the mind’s awareness from the limiting grip of the ego.” (p. 117) The perfect mystical union, the

bliss of enlightenment, is not available to our mortal comprehension, for to think is to wallow in the light of consciousness, which means judging through the filter of polarities. Consciousness delivers us to the profane and obscures the sacred. The ultimate mystical union of Eastern religious philosophy is the elimination of suffering through the dissolution of dichotomies. Zen Buddhists say the barrier to satori (enlightenment) is the conscious or rational mind. In Zen religious philosophy, one cannot train to achieve satori because that requires conscious effort. Rather, Zen masters use riddles called koans that are supposed to show the fruitlessness of such mental effort. In one example, the new monk is asked to discard everything. "But I have nothing," the monk replies. "Discard that, too!" demands his master. Another koan says if sitting in meditation leads to enlightenment, then frogs must be enlightened—the null blankness of all mystical achievement.

Religion is the mechanism for returning to the original unity of mind before The Split, but after a few million years of hominid brain evolution, we humans are far beyond the actual return to the unity of pre-consciousness. The best we can do is frequently visit through religious ritual. While homage to *in illo tempore*, the beginning of human time, is still the goal for the mystic seeker, the reality for the typical religious person is more about integrating The Split rather than the journey to achieve the Absolute. We live in the rational world and embrace our consciousness. At the same time we are attracted to and enjoy ritual behaviors that suppress consciousness and evoke emotions. We engage in religious rituals because we are hard-wired to do them, and we get emotional pleasure or satisfaction from them. We learn specific religious traditions just like the specific language we acquire, but the desire and ability to receive both language and religion are genetically driven.

The interplay between consciousness, religious ritual, and emotion is a constant negotiation. The feelings engendered by religious acts and observances range from negligible to overwhelming, as when someone attains the elation of the unified state. How do emotions change as a result of religious behavior? Does ritual behavior—the actions of religion—spark specific emotional content or does the ritual have a generic effect on suppressing conscious-

Chapter 1 Introduction to The Split Hypothesis of Religion

ness, which opens emotions to whatever the organism's needs are at the moment? The interaction of the human emotional system and religious behavior is an area ripe for examination.

There are many challenges to explaining how and why religion biologically evolved. Why do people create supernatural agents (gods), the mostly human-like entities that people invoke to populate their elaborate religious doctrines? If religion has a biological basis, does the imagining of gods as well? Do religious behaviors improve people's well being, and if so, how? The Split Hypothesis provides a framework with which to approach and answer these questions. This proposition offers a method for understanding the roots of religion, this most befuddling aspect of human nature, and can be used as the basis to further investigate its evolutionary origins.