Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. 'They've a temper, some of them - particularly verbs, they're the proudest - adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs - however I can manage the whole lot! Impenetrability That's what I say!'

'Would you tell me, please,' said Alice, 'what that means?' 'Now you talk like a reasonable child,' said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. 'I meant by "impenetrability" that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you meant to do next, as I suppose you don't intend to stop here all the rest of your life.'

'That's a great deal to make one word mean,' Alice said in a thoughtful tone. 'When I make a word do a lot of work like that,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'I always pay it extra.'

'Oh!' said Alice. She was much too puzzled to make any other remark.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*.

Other worlds have other words; and other words help make other worlds. Had Alice had the benefit of an interview with Tzvetan Todorov, she would not have been so rapidly reduced to a monosyllable: she would have seen that once on the other side of the looking-glass, everything had to be different, and not casually so. She would have understood at once why she should have to cut the cake after handing it round to the Lion, the Unicorn and the White King and they had taken their slices; and why, when she is looking for Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the signs at every crossroads mark her destination in opposite directions. And she might equally have expected that words in that world, instead of lying down inertly in their lexical places, should have had to queue for their wages on Saturday nights. For fantasy worlds are not the pointless products of magination: they are necessarily better structured than the 'real' human world. And if we cannot predict fantasy worlds, we can always in principle reconstruct their logic. i Now it is obvious that no great gulf separates fantasy worlds from real worlds, for the good reason that we order and give significance to the real world by virtue of the same mental principles which allow any man to construct a fantasy. 'Condensation' and 'dislocation' are functions of consciousness as much as of the unconscious, making possible imagination, sudden 'intuitive' comprehension, insight)- and the same small stock of logical possibilities - inversion, negation, analogy, substitution - governs the process of thinking the 'unthought' as of thinking that which has already been
thought. And if analytically we may oppose the prosaic to the fantastic, as the two poles of a continuum of cognitive possibilities, that does not mean that the prosaic is not fantastical, or the fantastic not prosaic. To grant significance to some element of the real world is to appropriate it into a pre-existing network of other significations (a human process which has no thinkable end as it has no imaginable beginning), a network which is not 'factual' but precisely 'theoretical', and which, as Lévi-Strauss rightly contends, has no empirical existence, merely a capacity to reproduce its structure. Inversely, the non-existent, the fantastical, can be thought only in relation to that which has already been granted a place in the network of significations — in a word by denying elements of the world already 'known' and substituting for them others, whose relation to what is retained in the relevant meaning-set produces the effect of 'strangeness'. The true inhabitants of the planets of Alpha Centauri are simply unthinkable; but we all know about Cyclopes, Centaurs and little green men.

No doubt religion is all bunkum; but if it is, then so is every other human enterprise (conscious enterprise that is — DNA may do as it pleases). I speak not, of course, of such formal propositions about reality that any religion may make, but of the manner in which it makes them, and of its cognitive procedure. But the peculiar interest of religion is that it constitutes the point at which recognised (and often admitted) fantasy is brought most sharply against the prosaic and compelled to co-exist with it. To put the point slightly differently, the fantastic is made real, and the real fantastic. In religion, everything is, as it were, in quotationmarks. Eskimo shamans 'visit' the bottom of the sea (they really do); spirits 'eat' offerings (they really do); Inannuk 'waits' for Dumuzid at the 'door of the storehouse' (her temple at Eannak); the gods of Olympus 'live' on the savour of sacrifice and the pungency of aromatics; the wine 'is' the blood of Christ (it really is). Now all of these are indistinguishable from ordinary propositions, not only in syntax and grammar, but in their intended referentiality: they are taken neither as figures of speech nor as allegories by those who believe them. Yet they are different from boring propositions such as 'This is a black beetle' (spoken when one is looking at a member of the species *Blatta orientalis*) precisely in their illocutionary force: they are taken as 'interesting', as non-evident (though true). And they are interesting precisely because they offer wide scope for interpretation, not at the level of immediate deduction ('How long does it take the shaman's spirit to get down there?'), but at a secondary level, the level of implication, or, to use Dan Sperber's term, 'evocation' (1974). All utterance, verbal or non-verbal, is naturally
subject to interpretation at this level; but some utterances matter more than others. The more they matter, as with religious utterances, the more they receive interpretation; and although in some societies and in some contexts a deliberate effort is made to foreclose the majority of conceivable evocations in favour of authoritative ones, there is no theoretical limit to the interpretability of utterances. The only practical limit is whether people think that a given utterance is worth understanding.

The fantastic element in religion is not in itself particularly interesting, inasmuch as it is merely a sub-set of the entire human capacity for thinking and speaking about the non-actual, which has existed at least since the first lie and the development of the future tense (Steiner, 1975: 110-235), and presumably long before, in that higher mammals are capable of learning to understand and respond to symbolic information. But what it is interesting to examine is the nature of the frontier, constantly renegotiated, which any particular religion defines between the actual and the fantastic, between what everyone in that social formation knows and what no one knows. The history of religion is the history of taller and taller stories being claimed more and more true, until no one can be bothered to understand or to interpret: the symbols and the discourse lose their evocative power; the institution which tells the stories becomes just one of several, with no outstanding claim upon attention, upon the desire to interpret afresh. Its claims are just ideology, merely mad, an affront to good sense, or irrelevant to 'real' problems. And the viability of a religious structure is governed by its capacity to weave the fantastic with the actual, to link its lies to truth: more than any other kind of human fantasy, religion is doomed to be parasitical upon social reality, precisely inasmuch as it claims to be true.

The specific beliefs of any religious system have little more than curiosity value, though as 'facts' they naturally delight positive minds; and they are an appropriate subject of enquiry within a carefully defined context or contexts. But far more interesting must always be the problem of how they come to be believed, the sense in which they are 'believed' and the relation between religious beliefs and other concurrently held beliefs and practices.