This inquiry into the nature of religious thought is a by-product of attention devoted to quite a different problem. For several years now I have sought for a resolution to the "tug-of-war" between "insiders" and "outsiders" for methodological control of research on religion in our academic institutions. According to the "insiders" no proper understanding of religions is possible unless religio-theological categories are somehow incorporated into the methodological framework employed by the student of religion. The "outsider," on the other hand, sees such a methodological injunction as putting in jeopardy the very existence of an academic study of religion because it opens to debate whether the agenda for that study is finally to be determined by the academy or the "church." My work on the problem has been aimed at showing that the secularized scholarship of the sciences, broadly conceived, is the norm for all disciplines, Religious Studies included, seeking explanatory understanding of things and events in the world. And I have argued that such an approach to understanding the nature of the religious phenomenon has a transcultural perspective that cannot be matched by interpretive frameworks that employ religious or theological categories. The "insiders" in this debate do not deny that the academic study of religions must in some sense transcend the religious discourse of the devotees; they agree, that is, that such a study of religions must be more than merely an elaboration of the faith of those they study. They also argue, however, that properly critical theology is not partisan and that it can, therefore, provide a scientifically acceptable perspective from which to seek an understanding of the nature of religion, a perspective that is sympathetic to religion.

Reflecting on the arguments in support of the "insider" view of the
nature of Religious Studies it seemed to me that a significant but unexamined assumption was being made, namely, that theology and religious thought are essentially indistinguishable enterprises. That assumption, even though not extraordinary, does not carry the force of a self-validating truth. But without that assumption the argument of the “insiders” carries little weight. It was evident, therefore, that a careful examination of the assumption and its implications might help yield a resolution of this dispute. And it is that task of clarification to which this book is committed.

The argument to be presented here is not merely speculative or philosophical. I will be concerned to provide a testable hypothesis about the nature of thought that will help determine the relation of theology to what might be more generally referred to as “religious thought.” The essential structure of that theory derives from Lévy-Bruhl’s dichotomy hypothesis that posits a radical difference between the mythopoeic thinking that predominantly characterizes the thought of “primitives” and the philosophic/scientific thought that predominantly characterizes “moderns.” In tracing the development of philosophic and scientific thought in western civilization, refinements to that hypothesis become possible, I argue, that will allow us to make sense of the notions of theology and religious thought as quite distinct intellectual operations and so undermine that assumption which grounds the “insider” argument for a religio-theological approach to the study of religious phenomena. In structuring the argument presented here, I have had to draw upon a wide range of scholarship in fields in which I do not have specialist training. That, of course, involves risks but wholly unavoidable risks, I think, if general problems of the kind I raise are ever to find resolution. I have attempted, moreover, to minimize the problems that might emerge from covering unfamiliar terrain by means of a thorough and balanced assessment of the relevant expert analysis and argument. Time will determine whether I have been sufficiently judicious in that task.

It will not be possible to elaborate on the significance of this argument for the academic student of religion without significantly detracting attention from the primary aim of this book. It is therefore the history of the notions of theology and religious thought to which my attention will be confined in this book.