USE OF THE PHRASE "PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS": TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLANATION

by Benjamin Bennett-Carpenter 🆔

Abstract. When people use the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus," how does one explain its significance? Normally attributed to evangelical Protestant Christians, use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" is a complicated phenomenon, and an explanation of it requires drawing upon resources from across multiple disciplines rather than a single discipline only. Attempts to explain exactly what the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" means frequently can be mystifying, on the one hand, or dismissive and simplistic, on the other hand. This article moves potentially toward a better context for understanding use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" by drawing upon insights from multiple disciplines, including (1) rhetorical and cultural-historical studies, (2) evolutionary and cognitive psychology, and (3) biological/behavioral and social/anthropological studies in order to set forth some basic lines of explanation for use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus." The article concludes with some possible testable statements for future empirical studies.

Keywords: biological; cognitive; evolutionary psychology; interdisciplinary; Jesus; person; psychological; religion; rhetorical; social

PROBLEM/ISSUE

How does one explain the use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus?" Specific insights from rhetorical studies, cultural history, evolutionary anthropology/psychology, cognitive psychology, and biology may point toward an integrated, interdisciplinary, scientific explanation for use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" by devotees. Such an explanation is important because of the widespread, powerful, and often perplexing use of the term "Jesus" by many Christians, particularly

Benjamin Bennett-Carpenter is Special Lecturer in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric and the Bachelor of Liberal Studies Program at Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA; e-mail: bennettc@oakland.edu.

evangelical Christians, but also by anyone describing "Jesus" as a "person" or claiming a "personal relationship with Jesus."

The problem is that for someone to describe "Jesus" as a "person"—and for some to claim a "personal relationship with Jesus"—is, for many people, mystifying and seems to defy explanation in any other terms that are not either just as, if not more, mystifying, or, otherwise, too simplistic or dismissive.

> Mystifying: *I have a personal relationship with Jesus. To me, this means I have an intimate, internal interaction with a divine–human being who resides within the fabric of my affective, mental, and spiritual experience from day to day.*

Perhaps this explanation suffices for some from within a spiritual or faith-based perspective. Yet, as an outsider or one with a secular or scientific perspective, one may ask, now what does all *that* mean?

> Simplistic/dismissive: A *"personal relationship with Jesus" is just "crazy" talk for the deluded notion that there's a little man in your heart or brain—a man who died 2,000 years ago in the Middle East but now shows up at your breakfast table in Duluth (or wherever you happen to be) for prayers and chats whenever you need him.*

This account could end the matter for some others. Yet does this supposed explanation really do justice to people's experience of what they think of as a personal relationship with Jesus?

This article assumes that understanding the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" and "Jesus" as a "person" is a complicated task. For such a complicated task, any one particular academic discipline will prove to be insufficient. If one takes any complex phenomenon and approaches it from just one discipline and concludes that this is the single, correct, complete explanation, it becomes readily apparent that such an approach is in most cases vastly insufficient and often erroneous. As many have pointed out (e.g., Klein 1990; Klein and Newell 1997; Boix Mansilla 2006; Repko 2007; Repko 2012; Szostak 2007; Szostak 2012), for complex phenomena there is need for interdisciplinary and integrative studies, particularly in studies of religion and spirituality (e.g., Stausberg 2015, 148; Paloutzian and Park 2015, 168, 174–75).

Perhaps a need for at least a *multidisciplinary* approach to explaining religious phenomena is assumed by many readers of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. To get a better explanation of a question such as the one at hand, it is clear that we quickly find ourselves immersed in multiple disciplines from across a range of liberal arts and sciences. As Repko (2012) points out, the range of disciplines from the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts may be understood to offer particular and various responses to phenomena. Various disciplines may be understood as responses

to reality that attempt to negotiate complex and challenging information as that information presents itself to human beings (101ff.). Here, the present article will attempt to present and integrate select insights from across a focused range of relevant disciplines, including rhetorical studies, cultural history, evolutionary anthropology/psychology, cognitive psychology, and biology. This effort, then, moves beyond multidisciplinary only to an *interdisciplinary* effort defined by its ambitions of "comprehensiveness" and "integration" (Boix Mansilla 2006, 3ff.). This *integration* of insights from multiple disciplines is understood to be the key, original contribution of interdisciplinary work of this kind.

It is important to point out also from the outset that the status of "explanation"—a goal of this article—is often identified as a task that is distinct from other tasks such as "interpretation." Explanation in a scientific context is distinguished from hermeneutics in a humanities context (e.g., Lawson and McCauley 1990; Slone [2006] 2014) and in relation to other methodologically related tasks. "Explanation" as a task has a practical agenda: that is, to recognize or make sense out of phenomena that otherwise would be mystifying. In a scientific context, widely conceived, *explanation* ought not only to be able to illuminate previously mystifying phenomena but also synthesize insights about phenomena in such a way that is useful and clarifying, and may have the ability to make predictions about future phenomena. Ultimately, an explanation ought to be testable in some fashion, but as matters stand for the purposes of this article, such tests may be worked out empirically or existentially elsewhere based upon what is initiated here.

In short, when people of faith invoke "Jesus" or having a "personal relationship with Jesus," this article claims—with the help of Justin Barrett (2000; 2004), Pascal Boyer (2001; 2003), Jay Feierman (2009a; 2009b), Tanya Luhrmann (2012; 2013a; 2013b), and Joseph Bulbulia (2004), among others—that it is, in part, the result of having a brain, produced by millions of years of evolutionary history that finds the idea of a "person" with special qualities such as having no physical limitations and unlimited communication abilities as particularly effective. This appeal to such a "person" takes place in a context of a human being's cognitive architecture, which is particularly sensitive to detecting possible agency even though in most cases such agency is not present in the given environment. The thought or perception of agency or a "person" may be cultivated through particular bodily and mental practices such as prayer, in which one exhibits a submissive posture and attributes certain thoughts as coming from this "person" rather than one's self.

To begin to explain usage of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" in these terms is to move beyond mystification when encountering this practice among evangelical Christians and others. In the cultural-historical context of so-called Western, American, and global culture,

among evangelical Christians and others, a primary identification for this "person" is understood to be "Jesus." The powerful cultural history, including politics, of identification with the term "Jesus" makes dismissive or simplistic accounts of it problematic and offers rationale for why not just any term has the same powerful impact in contemporary culture. Rather than dismissing or mystifying the use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus," a potentially illuminating, integrative explanation comes through relevant insights from multiple select disciplines.

To put together the elements of this claim, we turn first to establishing some basics of interdisciplinary inquiry and the original contribution it makes and then move to an account of rhetorical, cultural-historical aspects of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus."

BASICS AND ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY

As Veronica Boix Mansilla (2006) from Project Zero at Harvard University has put it, "Interdisciplinary research has emerged as a hallmark of contemporary knowledge societies" (1). Over the past three decades or so, attention to such *interdisciplinary* research has come into its own in explicit and self-conscious terms through the work of, among many others, Julie Thompson Klein (1990), Klein and William Newell (1997), Mieke Bal (2002), Joe Moran ([2002] 2010), Boix Mansilla (2006), Allen Repko (2007; 2012), Rick Szostak (2007; 2012), and organizations such as the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies. While the term "interdisciplinary" and related terms such as "multidisciplinary" and "transdisciplinary" remain contested terms (Szostak 2007; Szostak 2012), a consensus has emerged around the following definition of interdisciplinary studies:

> [An interdisciplinary study] is a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline, and draws on the disciplines with the goal of integrating their insights to construct a more comprehensive understanding. (Repko 2012, 16)

Such *interdisciplinary* work goes beyond *multidisciplinary* work primarily through integrating insights that may forge new conceptual ground, put forth powerful summarizing explanations of phenomena, and/or set out innovative lines of practice.

In order to set forth the basis for interdisciplinary inquiry toward the central question of this article—namely, *How does one explain the use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus"?*—one may turn to Boix Mansilla's important study (2006), "Interdisciplinary Work at the Frontier: An Empirical Examination of Expert Epistemologies." Boix Mansilla's research focused on fifty-five experts in various disciplines through interviews with

them and through analyzing samples of their work. These experts came from "five recognized interdisciplinary research institutes," including the Santa Fe Institute, the MIT Media Lab, the Research in Experimental Design group at XEROX-PARC, the Center for the Integration of Medicine and Innovative Technologies (CIMIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition, "interviewees associated with the Human Biology interdisciplinary major at Stanford University (HUMBIO)" were included (Boix Mansilla 2006, 2, 5–6ff.). Her study asked two main questions:

(1) How do researchers integrate disciplinary perspectives to advance their work?

(2) What criteria do they use to validate their research outcomes? (2)

And "amid the broad variety of seemingly idiosyncratic interdisciplinary research practices" she identified "at least three approaches to interdisciplinary inquiry . . . : *conceptual-bridging, comprehensive,* and *pragmatic*" (2).

It is the "comprehensive" approach that defines the ambitions of this article rather than the "conceptual-bridging" or the "pragmatic" approaches. As Boix Mansilla (2006) puts it,

> A *comprehensive* approach to interdisciplinary research produces multicausal explanations of a phenomenon whose interrelated components are typically studied by different disciplines (e.g., biological and cultural human variation). In this case disciplinary perspectives are interwoven to account for the phenomenon in its full complexity. This approach is modeled after synoptic disciplines like history, geography, anthropology, or naturalistic biology. (3)

Powerful integrations of theories and also of phenomena have increasingly emerged through work that is explicitly and self-consciously addressing the problems and possibilities of interdisciplinary work (e.g., Klein 1990; Klein 1996; Repko 2007; Repko 2012; Gagnon and Schulz 2013) and also through "content-specific explorations" (Boix Mansilla 2006, 4) that deliver wide-ranging and incisive explanations (e.g., Dawkins [1976]1989; Dawkins [1986]2006; Spier 1996; Diamond 1997; Christian [2005]2011; Pinker 2002; cf. Boix Mansilla 2006, 4).

Theorists and practitioners of interdisciplinary work tend to emphasize more or less of a boundary line or integration, depending on their inclinations, between what has come to be known as C. P. Snow's ([1959]2012) famous "two cultures" (Boix Mansilla 2006, 4): arts/humanities versus sciences, and also opposition between other general terms such as "nature" versus "culture" or, to take a more specific example, "genes" versus "environment." For example, "In [William] Durham's view, 'It has become increasingly apparent that the full explanation of human diversity requires attention to both biological and cultural processes'" (Boix Mansilla 2006,

14–15; citing Durham 1991). As for Boix Mansilla, she sets out the terms
of interdisciplinary inquiry as the following:

> I define interdisciplinary inquiry as the pursuit of an advancement in
> understanding—that is, an enhancement in our capacity to solve prob-
> lems, produce explanations, create products, and raise questions—by means
> of bringing together bodies of knowledge and modes of thinking stemming
> from two or more disciplines. (5)

For the purposes of this article, we focus primarily on the effort to address
a problem through producing at least a preliminary explanation emerging
from several streams of disciplinary research.

Specifically, the goal of this article is to move toward the production of a
preliminary explanation of people's use of the phrase "personal relationship
with Jesus" that accounts for its complexity. The three primary moves that
provide the basis for this study include "*defining a multidimensional prob-
lem, reframing disciplinary findings,* and *articulating complex accounts*" (Boix
Mansilla 2006, 14). The first "epistemic move" is to address a complex
rather than a simple or narrow problem. The problem or issue in this study
is that supposed explanations of people's use of the phrase "personal rela-
tionship with Jesus" usually are either mystifying or simplistic/dismissive
and often do not illuminate the phenomenon in a way that begins to satisfy
the concerns of many scientists or science-based researchers. In addition,
explanations of "personal relationship with Jesus" usage that may be of-
fered from one discipline without attention to other disciplines remain too
narrow to offer a wide-ranging and incisive explanation.

A second epistemic move in a comprehensive interdisciplinary study
is to "reframe" disciplinary findings (Boix Mansilla 2006, 14). Rhetorical
and cultural-historical accounts of "Jesus" as a "person" and use of the
phrase "personal relationship with Jesus," while immensely valuable in and
of themselves, may also be reframed alongside or within the work of psy-
chology and anthropology. For example, work on the "personal" or on the
concept of "person" in particular may be drawn into the work of cognitive
psychology (and cognitive neuroscience). Meanwhile, cognitive psycho-
logical efforts, again while immensely valuable in and of themselves, may
be reframed alongside or within biological research. For example, specific
physical practices may be identified that appear to facilitate conceptual-
ization of a "person" (as distinct from a body, for instance) and result in
physiological/chemical payoffs. The bulk of the present study is devoted to
laying out some key disciplinary findings pertinent to "personal relation-
ship with Jesus" usage and increasingly expanding the explanatory frame.

As Boix Mansilla (2006) outlines, "The third and final epistemic move
in comprehensive interdisciplinarity involves the integration of insights
into a coherent explanatory/descriptive account" (15). This effort is not
meant to be merely a bridge between disciplines or pieces of a puzzle, but

rather an "integration of insights" (15). For the present study at hand, it is certain that any discipline could have *something* to say—from astrophysics to business—but for the present task of *explaining* "personal relationship with Jesus" usage (rather than *interpreting* or other possible tasks), some of the most illuminating explanations emerge from disciplines that include, border on, or span across (1) the humanities and social sciences, such as rhetorical and cultural-historical studies pertinent to "personal relationship with Jesus"; and (2) the social sciences and natural sciences such as evolutionary and cognitive psychology/anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, and behavioral biology (ethology). Thus, it is along these borders and expanses that we turn toward an explanation of use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus."

A Rhetorical and Cultural-Historical Account of the Phrase "Personal Relationship with Jesus"

To understand the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus," one must first look very closely at not only *what these particular words mean* but also *how they function in their given context*. For example, where and when did this phrase first appear? And how widely is it used? The present article specifically focuses on its use within the context of North American evangelicals, keeping in mind that "evangelicals" include not only Protestants, but also some Catholics (Bennett-Carpenter and McCallion 2012; McCallion, Bennett-Carpenter, and Maines 2012; Bennett-Carpenter, McCallion, and Maines 2013), Orthodox Christians, and other religious groups, including Mormons and "Jews for Jesus" (see Lindsay 2007, 256, citing Gallup data). It is important to note that using the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" is not limited to self-identified Christians but may also include some individuals in other groups such as Unitarian Universalists, Muslims, secular or nonaffiliated people (or those who answer "none" when asked what religion they practice), Gnostics, and those who identify with a "pop Jesus" (cf. Prothero 2003) in American culture and beyond. In the first place, attention to the basic meaning of, and cultural-historical context for, the words "personal," "relationship," and especially "Jesus" is needed. In the second place, rhetorical analysis is particularly helpful at understanding how the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" functions among contemporary evangelicals and others in North America and beyond.

Importantly, the term *personal* implies an immediacy and direct relationship to another individual. Per the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), it can also mean "existing as an entity with self-awareness, not as an abstraction or an impersonal force," as in a "personal God." Regarding evangelicals and others, the term "private" can sometimes be considered a synonym to "personal," and "political" as an antonym—but more common, rather, is a

distinction between "personal" and "private" and an *interaction* between or melding of "personal" and "political" (e.g., cf. Swartz 2012, 26, 261). The meaning of the term *relationship* may seem obvious but it can be helpful to spell out possibly less obvious resonances. Importantly, there is a specialized meaning that refers to "an emotional and sexual association or partnership between two people" (OED) as in "Mother and father's relationship began fifty years ago in a little town in the Caribbean." Another sense of the term may be used in the context of compounds such as "business relationship" and "personal relationship."

The term *Jesus* requires more elaboration. "Jesus" may refer to an individual human being in history known commonly as Jesus of Nazareth and who is attributed to be the founding figure of Christianity on whom the current Western or "common era" global calendar is based (here and below, cf., e.g., Fredrickson [1988]2000; Meier 1991–2016.; White 2004; Ehrman 2014). Believed at the time or in retrospect by a small group of Jews in the Roman Empire to be the "Messiah" (or in Greek, "Christ"), a religion of, first, Jewish sectarians and then non-Jews including Greeks and Romans, developed out of the Mediterranean. They expanded from a small sect to the state-sponsored religion under Constantine. Successive generations of Christians of varying but growing political and mythical power expanded throughout Europe to the Americas and to various parts of the world through imperial ambition coupled with missionary efforts and global trade.

The efficacy of the mythology centered around "Jesus" at given times throughout the past 2,000 years is difficult to overestimate, especially in a now more secular, pluralistic context, one that may reflect more similarity to the empire in which Christianity arose than to any other time since then. Attached to the term "Jesus" is, in short, a major global religion with over two billion people affiliated to it (Pew Research Center 2015) and a history of 2,000 years of cultural history, including major works of literature, art, and politics. As the OED puts it, "Jesus" is an English version of "Joshua," which means "salvation, deliverance," "a frequent Jewish personal name, which, as that of Founder of Christianity, has passed through [Greek] and [Latin] into all the languages of Christendom." "Jesus" or "Jesus Christ" are understood as the identifying terms in Christianity for the "Messiah" or "savior" and "the Son of God" that came, comes, and will come to "save the world." One should keep in mind, too, all the references, both linguistic and visual, related to "Jesus" that exist throughout contemporary American and global culture (e.g., cf. Prothero 2003).

The specific formulation of having a "personal relationship with Jesus," however, is relatively recent. While in-depth field and archival research is needed to determine a definitive history of the phrase, a task that is beyond the purposes of this article, it appears that the term was in use by at least approximately the mid- to late nineteenth century in works such as Ernest

Renan's (c. 1868) study, *Saint Paul,* where he writes, "[Paul's] vision on the road to Damascus has been a true *personal relationship with Jesus*" (85; emphasis added). Caroline Hallett states in her 1882 *Rest By The Way; or, Plain Readings for the Sick and Troubled* that "I am brought into such close *personal relationship with Jesus*" (34; emphasis added).

And, while there are other examples from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries (e.g., Boynton 1892, 132; Burton 1898, 9; Ellis 1936, fn. 403; Barclay 1956, 92), the apparent primary immediate catalyst or symbolic correlate for the rise in its usage came in relation to the evangelistic work of Billy Graham and other public evangelists around the late 1940s and increasingly from the 1950s to 1970s with the rise of television. Graham's work and success may be seen in part as an outgrowth of American "enthusiasm" and revival culture from John Wesley to televangelism and music festival culture. For example, in a 1965 publication from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, a typical scene and invitation is made:

> Jesus Christ wants to have a personal relationship with you. Picture, if you will, Jesus Christ standing at the door of your heart (the door of your emotions, intellect and will). Invite Him in; He is waiting for you to receive Him into your heart and life. ([1965]2009; also cf. Graham 1953)

Interestingly here the formulation is reversed from originating with the individual so that the initiation of the "personal relationship" comes from "Jesus Christ" to "you."

By the 1970s, having a "personal relationship with Jesus" was a definitive and widely known phrase and identity marker for evangelical Protestants. Use of the phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" continued through the 1980s right up to the present day and came to include usage by Catholics, among others (e.g., McDonagh 1981; Treloar 2002, 597ff.; Rogers and Heltzel 2008, 414; Pope Francis 2013a, para. 1, 3, 180, 264ff; Pope Francis 2013b, para. 18; Pope Francis 2014a, para. 2; Pope Francis 2014b, para. 3; see also Bennett-Carpenter et al. 2013). The phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" then is primarily identified with "evangelical Protestants" or "Protestant evangelicals" or "evangelicals" who are identified as "Protestant" or "Protestant Christians"—but also includes "evangelical Catholics," "Catholic evangelicals," and other variations such as "Charismatic" and "Pentecostal," including other Christians and also non-Christians. While extensive ethnographic and surveying work is needed to measure the extent and precise function of the phrase within discrete locals and isolated situations, the center of its usage is arguably the United States—with then its usage spreading over the years throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

It is important to recall also that "Jesus" is, as the OED points out, a personal name and, crucially, one that comes from a Jewish tradition of

not addressing the divine with any name. "Jesus" in this context could and does become for many devotees an intimate name for the nameless or the un-nameable: YHWH in the Jewish tradition, and the Almighty God in Abrahamic faiths, including Christianity in particular. An intimate, personal, even friendly name is available to those who opt for it over the nameless or un-nameable, the unfathomable, the Wholly Other, the Ultimate Mystery, or simply the vast expanse of an infinite universe. And rather than that name being their own, or that of a parent, friend, or significant other—all of whom, realistically, disappoint—an idealized or hyper-real person that has a knowable, accessible name is chosen. At the same time, however, "Jesus" can mean all sorts of things to all sorts of people, and even to the same people or person at different times: person, icon, tradition, God, friend; in some cases enemy or imposter, curse, joke, idea, belief, sound/mantra, you name it.

The idea that the term "Jesus" may be assumed but used differently by devotees, skeptics, critics, apostates, and the indifferent points to its functioning in rhetorical terms as an "ideograph." Ideographic analysis— a form of contemporary rhetorical analysis—typically puts the word or phrase that is under analysis in brackets like these: "<," ">." In the work of Michael McGee (1975; 1980; 2001), ideographic analysis may begin with widely used terms such as <freedom> or <the people> and analyze how they operate as word-symbols (technically, "word-signs"): something like buzzwords that are assumed by multiple parties, even opponents, in ideological struggles—for example, the political left versus the political right. As Bennett-Carpenter et al. (2013) describe,

> Importantly, "ideographic" rather than "ideological" analysis attends to the word-symbols (ideographs) being employed across particular ideologies. While ideographs such as <freedom> or <the people> may freight particular ideological commitments for some people, it may be a vehicle for very different, even contrary, commitments for others. Ideographs thus provide some of the key vocabulary in a group's Wittgensteinian "language game" or "final vocabulary" as Richard Rorty describes (1989). Attention to the phrase [<personal relationship with Jesus>] as an ideographic phrase is primarily attention to rhetorical resonance rather than primarily ideological commitment—even though the ideological is an integral, that is, integral and multifarious, element of this ideographic phrase. (2–3)

Simply put, the whole phrase "personal relationship with Jesus" operates as a symbol (or more precisely speaking, a "sign") that becomes assumed within the specialized context of those who employ it. As Bennett-Carpenter et al. (2013) describe,

> By employing [<personal relationship with Jesus>] language, the user communicates his or her participation not only within a particular language game or final vocabulary but also with a particular group, the terms of its

given ideology, and, perhaps most importantly for ideographic analysis, its emotional bonds. The emotional bonds that surround <Jesus> and [<personal relationship with Jesus>] language are difficult to [overestimate] and access fundamental issues for individual users such as basic trust and inter- and intra-personal conceptions and relationships. To use the ideographic phrase <personal relationship with Jesus> is to signal the realized (or aspirations of), intimate psychological-social bond with an element of one's self (real or imagined), with other people (who employ [<personal relationship with Jesus>]), and/or with a personified universe or what people think of as constituting the universe (in a "personal" way). (18)

In short, <Jesus> for the individual devotee may be intensely "personal," so much so that one has a "relationship" with him/it. <Jesus> then is not merely a figure in history but a "person" or entity that the individual may "relate" to frequently, possibly as a friend, a brother, a teacher, a healer/doctor, or even a spouse or lover. <Jesus> is the organizing symbol (more precisely, "sign" in the field of semiotics) by which many Christian devotees—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and others—orient their faith. The use of <Jesus> as an incantation or mantra is not uncommon. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus . . . " is repeated indefinitely in some contexts in order to assuage deep emotional or existential pain (Bennett-Carpenter et al. 2013, 14).

The use of <Jesus> as an *idealized or hyper-real person* is almost universal, especially among devoted Christians, but also even among many non-Christian and secular people. <Jesus> may be "the Son of God" or "Savior" and "Lord of All" for a Christian, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, be a "genius" on a par with the Buddha and Socrates for a nontraditional religious or a secular person. Either way, <Jesus> often represents an idealization or hyper-real presence of what a human person can or should be. One of the most striking versions of this idealization or hyper-reality is of <Jesus> as one's imagined friend (cf. Luhrmann 2012; 2013a; 2013b). A friend that is always there (in a certain sense) and may always provide comfort and emotional, psychological sustenance is one of the most compelling uses of <Jesus> among them all. One may add that <Jesus> could be referenced as an imposter, enemy, figment of the imagination, or hallucination but then, while not impossible, it is unlikely that one then joins the term <Jesus> with the terms <personal relationship with>.

As crucial as rhetorical and cultural-historical explanations are for the appearance, meaning, and usage of <personal relationship with Jesus>, and while there is much more to be said in this regard, one may continue to wonder what gives rise to and allows for the conditions of possibility for <personal relationship with Jesus> as a contemporary rhetorical, cultural, and historical phenomenon in the first place. One may wonder what other disciplines have to offer. How might the explanation for <personal

relationship with Jesus> as a powerful ideograph in Western, American, and global culture be reframed by other relevant disciplines? It is here that one turns to questions of cognitive and behavioral aspects of <personal relationship with Jesus>, beginning with a reach into the deep history of human beings and their predecessors.

AN EVOLUTIONARY AND COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT FOR AND APPLICATION TO <PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS>

Along with insights from rhetorical and cultural-historical studies, evolutionary and cognitive psychology are key to understanding how <Jesus> can be referred to as a "person" that people communicate with on a daily basis. Evolutionary psychology and anthropology point to a human brain that evolved in response to the extraordinary challenges of millions of years of hunter-gatherer societies (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992) and only recently developed agricultural, modern-industrial, and information societies. (Accounts of evolutionary history are of course widely available—e.g., Darwin [1859]2003; Dawkins [1986]2006; Ridley 2004). In a cognitive psychology oriented by evolutionary history, human intelligence is understood as not general only but rather as having evolved with domain-specific intelligence (Barkow et al. 1992; Mithen 1996; Boyer 2001). Rather than the brain being merely a general information processor, in evolutionary psychology the brain is understood to have evolved "modules" that address given problems in the hunter-gatherer, ancestral environments (Barkow et al. 1992; Mithen 1996; Pinker 2002; Cosmides and Tooby 2013; cf. Fodor [1975]1980; Fodor 1983).

Possible explanations of <personal relationship with Jesus> usage and referring to <Jesus> as a "person" begin to become increasingly illuminating from explanations from within evolutionary psychology and anthropology. Luhrmann (2012) sums up the contributions of Stewart Guthrie (1980; 1993; 2013), Boyer (1994; 2001; 2003), Scott Atran (2002), Barrett (2000; 2004), Bulbulia (2004), and others, for example, Todd Tremlin (2006) and Boyer and Brian Bergstrom (2008):

> The . . . field of evolutionary psychology argues that many of the building blocks of our psyche were formed through a slow evolutionary process to adapt us to a dangerous, unpredictable world. When we hear a noise in the next room, we immediately wonder about an intruder even when we know the door is locked. That's to our advantage: the cost of worrying when no one is there is nothing compared to the cost of not worrying when someone is [because the result may be fatal]. As a result, we are primed to be alert for presence, whether anyone is present or not.
>   Faced with these findings, some . . . argue that the reason people believe in supernatural beings is that our evolved intuitions lead us to overinterpret the presence of intentional agents, and those quick, effortless intuitions are so

powerful that they become, in effect, our default interpretation of the world. From this perspective, the idea of God arises out of this evolved tendency to attribute intention to an inanimate world. Religious belief would then be an accidental by-product of the way our minds evolved. (xii)

That is, evolutionary and cognitive psychology points to the operation of a "hyperactive agency detection device" (HADD) or system in human minds that overinterprets environments (Barrett 2004; Bulbulia 2004), the result being that humans are very good at detecting animals and persons and, also, that simultaneously they make many mistakes in this regard. Most people can think of such examples where one thought a person or animal was in one's midst only to find that it was a nonpersonal, natural effect of a nonpersonal, natural cause, for example, a windblown tree branch tapping the window. This common experience may demonstrate an artifact of the cognitive architecture and functioning that human beings have ended up with after millions of years of natural selection, most "recently" in our origins in hunter-gatherer societies.

Human beings are frequently mistaken when they detect possible agency, but in many cases it is much more crucial to be correct just one time no matter how many times one is incorrect. In a hunter-gatherer society or environments where survival is a daily struggle and death is a daily threat, an agent—whether human or animal—can represent a threat to one's existence. In such cases, being correct or incorrect just one time can mean life or death. For example, if in a hundred instances Individual A does not detect agency, and Individual A is ninety-nine percent accurate, that one time that A is mistaken could mean A's death. Meanwhile if in those hundred instances Individual B constantly detects agency—a hundred times—Individual B is mistaken ninety-nine percent of the time, but just that one time B is correct could mean B saved her/his life. Over generations, in such an environment, with such threats from various agents to consider, natural selection appears to have favored those who have overinterpreted the possibility of agency.

If one applies evolutionary and cognitive psychological findings and insight to the question of <personal relationship with Jesus> usage, one begins to see further payoff of not limiting oneself only to rhetorical and cultural-historical explanations of this phrase. From Boyer's work in *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (2001) and elsewhere (e.g., Boyer 1994, 2003; Barrett 2000, 2004; Atran 2002; Boyer and Bergstrom 2008), one may draw the idea that <Jesus> fits a common pattern that Boyer argues is found in a cognitive psychology and anthropology of religious thought. He describes the idea of units of information as having more or less favorable opportunity for "cultural transmission" based on some key variables (33). In short, applying Boyer to the ideograph <Jesus>, one finds that <Jesus> fits the favorable

conditions for cultural transmission because <Jesus> matches a normal cognitive template or "ontological entry" (51ff.) for information in that he/it is categorized as a "[PERSON]"—but then, also, crucially, he/it also has a "special feature." Boyer designates ontological categories such as "person," "plant," or "tool" with brackets like these: "[," "]." As Boyer puts it,

> This is generally true of religious concepts. They (more or less clearly) describe a new object by giving (i) its ontological category and (ii) its special features, different from other objects in the same ontological category. (62)
>
> . . . For example: Special ebony tree [all PLANT features] + recalled conversations (63).
>
> Translated, this means: to build your representation of the new object (special ebony trees), just go to your PLANT template, copy all the information that is true of plants (your default expectations about plants) and add a special 'tag' that says what is special about these particular plants. This works in the same way for the other examples of religious concepts. Here are the familiar ones:
>
> (21) Omniscient God [PERSON] + special cognitive powers
> (22) Visiting ghosts [PERSON] + no material body
> (23) Reincarnation [PERSON] + no death + extra body available
> (24) Zombies [PERSON] + no cognitive functioning
> (25) Possessed people [PERSON] + no control of own utterances
> (26) Virgin birth [PERSON] + special biological feature
> (27) Listening statue [TOOL] + cognitive functions
>
> This, obviously, is a terribly simplified description of people's actual representations. But that is an advantage. Summarizing concepts in this way highlights a very important property of religious concepts. Each of these entries in the mental encyclopedia includes an ontological entry between brackets and a 'tag' for special features of the new entry. These tags added to the default category seem very diverse, but they have one property in common. *The information contained by the tags contradicts information provided by the ontological category*. (63–64; emphasis in original)

Thus, I suggest, with "Jesus," one could have something like the following:

<Jesus> = [PERSON] + no physical limitations (such as time, space, death) + unlimited communication ability

That is, the ideograph <Jesus> matches a cognitive ontological category of [PERSON] with the additional tags of having no physical limitations and unlimited communication ability.

Ideas like these become plausible and, more importantly, memorable and more likely to be transmitted because they are neither simply normal, nor too outlandish or pointless. For example, the following are not and probably will not be successful:

(5) There is only one God! He is omniscient but powerless. He cannot do anything or have any effect on what goes on in the world.
(6) The gods are watching us and they notice everything we do! But they forget everything instantaneously.
. . . (11) There is only one God! He is omnipotent. But he exists only on Wednesdays. (Boyer 2001, 72)

These ideas start to become comical, but rather than being flippant Boyer is giving examples of ideas that will not work in most cases for successful religious ideas. On the contrary, <Jesus> fits the ontological category of [PERSON] in many people's minds with, then, special features that appeal with normal plausible, select variations that contradict some aspect of what we normally think of when we think of a [PERSON]—such as having a body that is subject to physical limitations of time and space. Very simply put, there is a match between the idea of <Jesus> and the way our brains work so that <Jesus> catches on, spreads, and grows in various human cultures.

In short, applying Boyer, if one claims a <personal relationship with Jesus>, it is the result of having a brain, produced by millions of years of evolutionary history, that finds particular units of information particularly effective. The idea of a [PERSON] with special qualities such as having no physical limitations and unlimited communication abilities who also may be the "alpha" and "omega" of the universe is particularly catchy. Such an idea probably would not catch on if <Jesus> was all-powerful and caring but had no way to communicate with anyone or if he was the Son of God but popped out of existence any time anyone thought of him.

Likewise, for cultural-historical reasons, not just any word or name can be put in the place of <Jesus>, for example, if someone claims a "personal relationship with Bob":

"Bob" = [PERSON] + no physical limitations (such as time, space, death) + unlimited communication ability.

Logically, we have the same "formula" here, but when this term "Bob" is drawn *out* from cognitive psychology in an abstract context and, rather, drawn *into* the cultural history of Western, American, and global culture (including Judaism, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin language, and including Hellenistic Roman culture, along with the rise of Christianity, and so on), then the cultural-historical force of the term <Jesus> as opposed to "Bob" or something else comes to the fore. This cultural-historical reality is difficult to overestimate and, along with the evolutionary and cognitive psychological context, helps clarify the "mystery" of <personal relationship with Jesus> references and is a strong argument against simplistic/dismissive explanations for <Jesus> or <personal relationship with Jesus> usage.

BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF <PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP
WITH JESUS> USAGE

From the above reflections, while one may see that there is a match be-
tween the idea of <Jesus> and the way our brains work so that <Jesus>
catches on, spreads, and grows in various human cultures, one may also
inquire into behavioral and social aspects of <personal relationship with
Jesus> usage. When one combines cognitive considerations with certain
practices or *behaviors*, a possible way of understanding the use of the phrase
<personal relationship with Jesus> expands. This emphasis on practices is
one, among others, of the key insights of Luhrmann's work in *When God
Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*
(2012) and elsewhere (2013a; 2013b). She suggests that some "people train
the mind" and that "coming to a committed belief in God [is] more like
learning *to do* something than *to think* something" (xxi; see also Luhrmann
2013a; Luhrmann 2013b). In fact, one may add, the *doing* or practice here
is a bodily practice as well as a cognitive practice.

   Luhrmann (2012) argues that one of the most important things to
understand about many evangelicals and their relationship with the super-
natural (and this might apply to people of many different faiths or believers
in "the spiritual" generally speaking) is that their *thoughts* are often taken
by them to be *perceptions* (cf. Swiney and Sousa 2013; Bennett-Carpenter
2015). As she puts it,

> Faith asks people to consider that the evidence of their senses is wrong.
> In various ways, and in varying degrees, faith asks that people believe that
> their minds are not always private; that persons are not always sensible; that
> invisible presences should alter their emotions and direct their behavior;
> that reality is good and justice triumphant. (xii-xiii)
>
> [In a context like a Vineyard Christian Fellowship church]: You are asked
> to experience some of your thoughts as being more like perceptions. (41)

As one of her field work sources states, "God's voice is like a fuzzy radio
station . . . that needs more tuning" (93), the implication being that the
brain or part of the brain is more like a tuner or receiver rather than a
closed-system machine that only sends out signals but does not receive
them. This tuning ability or ability to attribute some thoughts to God
as opposed to one's self comes directly through prayer practices which
require a great deal of continuous time and effort. Luhrmann found that
a personal relationship with God came exclusively through this activity:
"Prayer is understood [by the evangelicals she studied] as the only way to
create a relationship with God and indeed the only way to reach God at all"
(133). Luhrmann calls this "a real psychological *skill*" (134, emphasis in
original). "They learn to reinterpret the familiar experiences of their own
minds and bodies as not being their own at all—but God's" (xxi).

Moreover, part of this practice is to act in such a way that, if they are not at first "getting it" or do not experience God as real, they suspend their disbelief or inability and they act as if they were relating to God and as if God were real. This could be the proverbial "fake it till you make it" that is heard in some circles. As Luhrmann (2012) describes,

> If the first task in becoming able to experience God as an intimate friend is learning to recognize God in the privacy of one's mind, the second task is learning to relate to God as a person. But God is not very much like human persons, despite our anthropomorphism. (72)

Thus, evangelicals, because of the difficulty of the task of relating to God in a personal way, sometimes find themselves in the position where they must "*pretend in order to make the pretense into a reality*" (Luhrmann 2012, 73; emphasis in original; see also Luhrmann 2013a; 2013b). But even as God or Jesus might then be something akin to an imagined friend, Luhrmann's evangelicals seemed to be quite aware that they were not talking to or hearing or seeing God or Jesus like they would a human being in physical reality. "They behaved as if they believed that their experience of God took place only in their minds. But they also spoke as if it were more real, in some ways, than their everyday reality" (Luhrmann 2012, 80).

Thus, one may suggest it can be informative to think about the onto-logical status of <Jesus> as "hyper-real" and engagement with <Jesus> as something that falls within the realm of "play," theater, computer/video gaming, or, as has been described elsewhere as "simulacra" and "simulation" (Baudrillard [1976]1993; Baudrillard 1994; Bennett-Carpenter 2000, para. 26ff.; Bennett-Carpenter 2002, para. 40–42; also see Luhrmann 2012, 320; 2013a; 2013b). "God" then "is more like a state of mind" (Luhrmann 2012, 83), a state of mind that is facilitated by prayer prac-tices, which include particular body postures that a larger community recognizes. One may suggest then that a common ordering of explanation may be reversed from "I pray because I have a personal relationship with Jesus" to "I have a personal relationship with Jesus because I pray." It may be that such practices are not only a form of mental training but also may originate in bodily behavior that may be to some extent instinctual—and also that bodily and mental practices are mutually reinforcing.

The practice of prayer and its role in <personal relationship with Jesus> usage becomes increasingly illuminated by moving beyond ethnographic anthropological observation and explanation toward biological observa-tions and explanation that point toward instinct. As Jay Feierman points out (2009a; 2009b) in work on prayer postures in relation to evolutionary history, some religious behaviors are not only specific to particular reli-gious traditions within the last few millennia but also could be rooted in that evolutionary history. As Feierman (2009a) puts it, "Some but not all

human behaviors have evolved in ways that allow one to look for the same behaviors (called *homologous behaviors*) in lower organisms. To do this, one has to look for behavior that has the same form, rather than the same function" (69). Feierman finds that the "nonvocal aspect of petitioning prayer" does have "a traceable biological evolutionary history" (81) through what he calls the "make-oneself-lower-*or*-smaller-*or*-more-vulnerable behavior (*LSV behavior*)" (76):

> [T]here is a . . . religious behavior that appears to be present in all the major religions of the world and at least some tribal religions. It is seen in the nonvocal aspect of petitioning prayer. What can be seen is a local variation of make-oneself-lower-*or*-smaller-*or*-more-vulnerable behavior (*LSV behavior*). . . . LSV behavior is an ancient, coordinated motor pattern whose various forms can be traced back through the earliest vertebrates. LSV behavior has had many functions over its long evolutionary history. Its likely function was submission, which is an automatic response when two individuals of the same species have an aggressive interaction, one member is overwhelmingly more powerful, and escape or simple freezing (becoming motionless) is not possible. Submissive behavior acts as a 'releasing stimulus' or 'social releaser' to the aggressor and decreases the aggressor's aggressiveness. (76)

In short, nonvocal prayer postures could be an LSV behavior of submission found in simple vertebrates all the way through to mammals such as humans.

Applied to <personal relationship with Jesus>, one may see the prayer posture as derivative of LSV behavior, in particular as submission to a "higher power" of God/Jesus. That is, LSV behavior, by implication, may reference what could be called a higher-*or*-bigger-*or*-more-powerful (HBP) [PERSON] or agent. In a context where one attributes a presence of an HBP agent (through one's "hyperactive agency detection device" or system, i.e., HADD), one may move to LSV posture and engage in verbal interaction with the attributed agent, in this case <God> or <Jesus>. Furthermore, these practices and the thoughts or perceptions that accompany them deliver an emotional payoff that may be explained in part neurologically and chemically. As Schjødt et al. (2008) have shown, a regular practice of prayer may trigger dopamine release. As Luhrmann (2012) puts it, "People stay with this God . . . because the practice delivers emotionally" (268).

DISCUSSION/INTEGRATION: IMPLICATIONS/AFFECTIVE PAYOFF

What we end up with then is that some evangelical Christians and others who claim a <personal relationship with Jesus> practice (through prayer) attributing certain thoughts as perceptions (Luhrmann 2012) from <Jesus>, a [PERSON] with special features (Boyer 2001). Through active training of one's mind in relation to communities of evangelicals (Luhrmann 2012), applying Boyer (2001), this <Jesus> [PERSON] is thought to have no physical limitations (such as time, space, death) and to

have unlimited communication ability. If an individual is having difficulty in relating to this unusual [PERSON], which is common even among the most devoted, an individual may be encouraged to act as if these things were the case, to "play along," until the desired results come about (see Luhrmann 2012). Once an individual adopts a frame of mind that assumes the reality of this person, something like what could take place in a theater performance, computer/video game, or simulation when one "suspends one's disbelief," then real effects may be delivered to the person in the form of affective or emotional payoff (see Bennett-Carpenter et al. 2013).

The way Luhrmann (2012) describes this payoff is "the experience of feeling loved by God" (111). In the context of others, within a worship service, or individually, Luhrmann's evangelicals "experience powerful, bad, explosive emotions while being told that they are safe and loved" just like they would in psychotherapy (111). In this case, however, God (or Jesus) is the therapist (111, 119). If one can imagine one's creator and/or the ultimate cause and sustainer of the universe as *loving* toward one's self as an individual with all one's flaws, missteps, and peculiarities, perhaps one's wrongdoing or evil, and that the love is *unconditional* as a parent may have for a newborn child or as a lover might have for a beloved—then one begins to get the appeal of such a "relationship" (cf. Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990; Kirkpatrick 1998). A <personal relationship with Jesus> brings the relationship, in a sense, a bit closer than "God," because "Jesus" can be one's intimate friend, a peer. As mentioned above, "A friend [not simply a PERSON] who is always there [no physical limitation] . . . and may always provide comfort and emotional, psychological sustenance is one of the most compelling uses of <Jesus> among them all."

The emotions that accompany a practice of attributing certain thoughts to <God> or <Jesus> may have another function beyond a therapeutic one for the individual. They also may signal one's participation within a specific community or social group, in this case usually an evangelical community, usually Protestant, but also evangelical Catholic, Orthodox, and even some Jewish communities, some Unitarian Universalist, and others sometimes—for some even as "Americans." And although Bulbulia (2004) points out that simple "linguistic utterances [alone]—declarations of faith, pious professions, and so on—are poor vehicles for signaling commitment" (27), it depends upon *how* things are said and the levels and kinds of *affect* that accompany a verbal statement such as a <personal relationship with Jesus>. Statements made that are accompanied with pathos tend to be more effective in communicating with others the significance of such a "relationship" within one's life. Someone close to the author, upon learning of this research on this topic, said "my personal relationship with Jesus is the most important thing to me in the universe." This was said not as a mere pious profession or as a matter of fact but, rather, from the bottom of her/his heart, such that the author experienced the authentic pathos of

the moment perhaps almost as much s/he did. "[R]eligious emotions" such as this "signal . . . religious commitment," says Bulbulia, and "in order for emotions to work they must be *displayed*" (27; emphasis added).

Claiming a <personal relationship with Jesus> with all the emotions that may accompany this claim, then, "provides information" (Bulbulia 2004, 27) to others, indicating who may belong to the community and who may not, or who is considered more or less trustworthy and who should be punished. If one rejects or remains neutral on a <personal relationship with Jesus> claim, for the authentic <personal relationship with Jesus> user one may become suspect because one disregards a special person, a friend, with extraordinary powers—in fact, for the <personal relationship with Jesus> user, the ultimate source, sustainer, and reality of and beyond the universe itself, in the form of a superhuman friend/peer. If one accepts and claims a <personal relationship with Jesus> but does not show concomitant emotion, then one may become suspect. As Bulbulia (2004) describes, showing or displaying emotion offers a "reliable signal" of commitment and thus "altruistic exchange" or guarantees of security and well-being among one's group or community, but faking emotion ultimately will not cut it in the long run (28). Importantly, these displays of emotion cannot be private only but must be public, "ostentatious display" (Bulbulia 2004, 28). These displays could be emotional manifestations within a worship service, body postures associated with LSV behavior and intense emotion, verbal reports to others of individual spiritual experiences, or images or objects presented in a way to "display one's faith" such as religious images or jewelry, such as a cross or fish symbol (see McCallion and Bennett-Carpenter 2008).

It is important to note, also, the attribution of certain emotions coming from <God> or <Jesus>. Some evangelicals and others who claim a <personal relationship with Jesus> will attribute certain feelings as a "touch" or other sensation from <God> or <Jesus> rather than merely from themselves. Thus, as Luhrmann has pointed out that they may attribute certain *thoughts* of theirs as perceptions coming from God, one may also see that evangelicals attribute *feelings* of theirs as perceptions coming from God as well. Certain sensations then become in the minds of <personal relationship with Jesus> users not merely a physical response as the body carries out its functions, but also a "spiritual" response picking up "signals" sent by God or Jesus—so that not only one's mind but also one's body becomes a "receiver" like a radio tuner. As Luhrmann has claimed that evangelicals may consider their interactions or conversations with God as taking place within their own minds, likewise often evangelicals may consider some of their interactions taking place within their own bodies, for example, "inviting Jesus into your heart" or "feeling the presence of God." For evangelical Catholics, Orthodox, and others in Eucharistic traditions, this reality may be even more pronounced as they consume

<Jesus> through the Eucharist/Mass, so that <Jesus> is on one's tongue, in one's stomach, and dispersing energy, in a sense, throughout one's body.

If one claims a <personal relationship with Jesus>, it is the result also of particular practices that usually take place through a community, whether one at a given moment is alone, with individuals from that community, or in a group ritual such as a worship service. Simply put, this practice is prayer and in that prayer practice, if one claims a <personal relationship with Jesus>, one has trained, is training, and may continue to train one's self through the direction of or in association with a religious community— a given church or "fellowship"—to attribute certain thoughts and feelings one has to <Jesus> rather than to one's "self." What other people who would not claim a <personal relationship with Jesus> or are not "spiritual" would call all entirely *thoughts* within one's own thought-process, the "spiritual" <personal relationship with Jesus> user/devotee would call partly one's own thoughts and partly *perceptions* coming from <Jesus>.

A <personal relationship with Jesus> user is sustained in his/her LSV and attribution practices by those other <personal relationship with Jesus> users around him/her and, furthermore, experiences the affective, including chemical and neurological payoff of having, first, the perception of an all-loving, ever-present friend with him/her and, second, the sense of belonging to a group of people who have the most important information in the universe, access to the most power in the universe, and are all potentially a part of what constitutes the very nature of the universe, which ultimately, in an evangelical scenario, is either "Love" (cf. Bennett-Carpenter 2008) or separation from that "Love." As <personal relationship with Jesus> users individually and collectively display the emotion that inevitably comes from such perception, bonds of trust and deep affective identification with one another may be defined and sealed as much as is humanly possible.

Or, in other words, in sum, devoted <personal relationship with Jesus> users HADD systems are activated and thoughts/perceptions of an HBP agent become present. This HBP agent is thought of as a [PERSON] with special features such as having no physical limitations and unlimited communication ability so that this [PERSON] may be communicated with immediately in one's mind and/or body, verbally or nonverbally. In a so-called Western, American, and global context, one of the most powerful labels or names for this HBP agent or [PERSON] with special features is <Jesus>, a powerful ideograph that is assumed by many people even while multiple, even conflicting, agendas, identities, ideologies, and practices are attached to it. Why *this* name and not another is tied to the rhetorical and cultural-historical (including political) aspects of this name, which gained currency out of Jewish culture with the rise of the Greek and Roman Empires and imperial expansion of the Catholic and Orthodox churches and then also Protestant and other churches, entangled with capitalist economics and its competitors, and an increasingly influential

American practice of individual experientialism ties closely to immersive relationships with primary "others," first experienced with one's peers—first siblings (if any), then friends with which one bonded through LSV behavior in the face of HBP agents (such as more powerful peers, parents, teachers, and other adults). In a real-life simulated recapitulation of such a primal scenario, one may enact postures and movements, say words—otherwise known as prayer—that, while simulating previous experiences and behaviors, may have real reinforcing effects such as dopamine release, negotiation of psychological conflicts, in-group/out-group marking, and intense affective and social bonding with other simulators and disaffiliation from nonsimulators.

Final Remarks: Limitations, Questions, Possible Future Studies

Thus, with an orientation toward the rhetorical, cultural-historical, cognitive, behavioral, and affective aspects a phenomenon—coming from a range of fields and disciplines, including large-scale accounts of history, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, cognitive psychology, and rhetorical studies—we may move toward a less mystifying and not dismissive explanation of a "personal relationship with Jesus."

Of course numerous problems, limitations, and questions remain. For example, all of the above fits well in the anthropomorphic models from Guthrie (1980; 1993; 2013) to Boyer (2001), Atran (2002), and so on, but what about further connecting the dots and contributions from molecular biology or neuroscience (Farmer 2009; Kapogiannis et al. 2009)? The question of evolutionary "adaptiveness" raised in the work of David Sloan Wilson (2002; 2008), Jared Diamond (2013), and others (e.g., Feierman 2009b) remains a powerful ongoing debate that awaits further discovery and clarification. And one may wonder also about flipping of the generic <person>/<personal> ideograph or [PERSON] category around to specific persons. For example, plunging into "thick descriptions" of case studies in ethnographic or clinical psychological contexts could draw out a different scenario for how <personal relationship with Jesus> usage in particular cases, especially those outside a "norm." Thinking along these lines, one could ask, what is the etiology of fundamental concepts, after all? How can we trace a concept like [PERSON] into neuroscientific studies—for example, along the lines of what Martha Farah and Andrea Heberlein (2007) discuss in terms of how person-schemas are represented in several areas of brain activity? And this could be one of the most promising areas for understanding some of the nuts and bolts of what sits behind the possibility to even conceive of a "person," a "relationship" or anything else: increased attention to how the brain works, and how it came to be, in interaction with particular environments. All of this effort could be seen

as one part of the large project of "reverse engineering" human culture (cf. Taves 2015).

Whatever the next steps in such an endeavor, it is certain that rich, complex, illuminating explanations do more justice than single-discipline or "silver bullet" explanations do (Bennett-Carpenter 2014). Such explanations, when dealing with complicated phenomena such as people claiming a "personal relationship with Jesus," are generated through multiple reframings coming from the various disciplines. An ongoing issue with this kind of approach can be a loss of attention to important details that sweeping explanations may overlook or render irrelevant. Yet the payoff can be powerful explanations that help explain oft mystifying or dismissed behaviors in terms that can be useful for emotional intelligence and the prediction of outcomes in given situations with given variables.

For example, perhaps in future studies something like the following working statements could be tested in some fashion in relation to <Jesus> or other agents:

(1) *A simulated <personal relationship with Jesus> may have real effects.* If an individual simulates a <personal relationship with Jesus> by adopting and cultivating that relationship through deferential body postures and thought/perception attribution to <Jesus>, then the individual may experience real effects such as dopamine release, resolve or avoidance of previous psychological conflicts, in-group marking by intra-<personal relationship with Jesus>-user group members, and intense interpersonal bonding with other individuals in the group and also possibly experience punishment or rejection from non-<personal relationship with Jesus>-users (adapted from Skinner [1948]1992; Skinner [1957]2014; Skinner 1981; Schjødt et al. 2008, 165; Luhrmann 2012).

(2) *Sufficient displays of emotion in conjunction with <personal relationship with Jesus> discourse-use are perceived to indicate pro-<personal relationship with Jesus>-user group cooperative behavior.* If an individual's <personal relationship with Jesus> usage is accompanied by displays of emotion that are perceived by other <personal relationship with Jesus>-user group members to be sufficient, appropriate, and not faked, then that individual will be judged to be a "cooperator" and not a "defector" and group members will predict further cooperative behavior from that individual in relation to the <personal relationship with Jesus>-user group (adapted from Bulbulia and Sosis 2011, 365; cf. Irons 2001).

(3) *Perceived insufficient emotion in relation to <personal relationship with Jesus> claims leads to punishment and/or rejection from the <personal relationship with Jesus>-user group.* If an individual claims a <personal

relationship with Jesus> and if the individual's display of emotion in association with that relationship is judged by members of the group to be lacking, inappropriate, or faked, then the individual will be judged as a potential or actual "defector" and will be punished and/or ostracized from the <personal relationship with Jesus> user group (adapted from Bulbulia and Sosis 2011, 365; cf. Irons 2001).

By putting forward these or other working statements like them that may be tested empirically or through simulation studies, one may have an opportunity to move toward a comprehensive interdisciplinary explanation of this powerful, oft-mystifying phrase in a way that increasingly satisfies and challenges scholars, researchers, and scientists from across the disciplines.

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