

**Imagistic Traditions
in the Graeco-Roman World:
A Cognitive Modeling
of History of Religious Research**

*Acts of the Panel held during the XIX
Congress of the
International Association
of History of Religions (IAHR),
Tokyo, Japan, March 2005*

Edited by
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GRAECO-ROMAN RELIGIONS AND THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

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The aim of this chapter is to introduce a broad range of approaches to the cognitive study of religion, to demonstrate the relevance of this for historians, and to show how the chapters in this volume build on existing debates in the more specific area of research on 'imagistic traditions'.

Cognitive approaches to religion come in two main varieties: those seeking to explain recurrent or universal features and those attempting to explain patterns of variation. The theory of modes of religiosity, including the notion of an imagistic mode on which this volume focuses, is concerned with explaining variation. But this variation has to be understood against a backdrop of recurrent tendencies. Understanding the accomplishments of the field in general and of this volume in particular depends on an adopting an integrated approach to the study of religion, its roots both in human nature and in human history.

Human Nature and Cognitively Optimal Religion

Certain features of religious thinking and behaviour appear to be universal and ancient. Although systematic information on this topic has yet to be assembled, candidates for universality include notions of supernatural agency and of life after death, the attribution of good and bad fortune to transcendental causes, the idea that certain features of the natural world are outcomes intentional design, the performance of rituals and the endowment of them with symbolic meanings, and the idea that certain kinds of testimony or obligation are supernaturally sanctioned and therefore unchallengeable. These kinds of ideas may be described as 'cognitively optimal' in the sense that they are more intuitive,

memorable, or salient than other kinds of possible notions, all else being equal, given the way human minds naturally develop.

Recent research in scientific psychology and the biological sciences suggests that cognitively optimal religious concepts arise from biases in our species' evolved cognitive architecture. This research has been focused on three core areas.

First, the study of domain-specific cognition and intuitive ontological knowledge suggest that people acquire certain basic assumptions about the nature of the world around them according to a linked series of universal stages, or 'developmental schedules'. Cognitive processes that violate intuitive ontological expectations (giving rise to counter-intuitive concepts)¹ figure prominently in the domain of religion. For example, many supernatural agents (ghosts and gods) are assumed to think and feel in much the same way as ordinary human beings but are accorded special physical properties, such as the ability to pass through solid obstacles or to appear in more than one place at a time. Recent experimental evidence suggests that simple counterintuitive concepts are easier for people to recall than simple intuitive concepts, regardless of cultural differences². Moreover, in the domain of knowledge concerned with biological phenomena, we assume that organisms have essential properties that assign them immutably to particular classes of natural kinds. Closely related to intuitive thinking about natural kinds is the way we reason about social categories. Thus, religious thinking typically postulates distinct classes of persons defined by heritable essences in virtue of which they are entitled to assume sacred office (e.g. in the case of shamans, divine kings, emperors, etc.) or by means of which their persecution may be justified (e.g. in the case of witches, heathens, untouchables etc.)³. The same intuitive reasoning commonly underpins our representations of religious coalitions, for instance the way Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or Muslims and Jews in the Middle East construe the differences that divide them⁴.

Second, research on how people reason about their own and others'

1. Boyer 2001.

2. Boyer and Ramble 2001.

3. Cohen 2007.

4. Hirschfeld 1996.

mental states (most prominently the literature on ‘theory of mind’ or ToM) suggests that all normal humans continually make inferences about the intentions of other people, adjusting their behaviour in light of those inferences, sometimes in quite Machiavellian ways. ToM capacities appear to play a crucial role in the production of a number of concepts associated with the domain of religion. For instance, recent experimental research suggests that people are strongly biased to attribute mental states (desires, sensory responses, intentions, etc.) to dead persons, based on basic ToM operations, even though they are readily able to represent biological and physical functions as having terminated⁵. Much recent research has focused on the role of ToM operations in the construction of concepts of extranatural agency. A counterintuitive agent is far more salient than a counterintuitive artifact or plant. This appears to be because an agent has a mind that can process information of strategic importance⁶. More importantly, a counterintuitive agent can access and utilize information in ways that ordinary mortals cannot (e.g. by means of ominipresence or special mindreading or thought-projection capacities). ToM is also clearly essential for representations of spirit possession and mediumship. Here, the idea is not merely that a person’s mental/emotional capacities can live on after the body has expired but that, in virtue of being separable in this way, minds and bodies can be temporarily dislocated and recombined. For such a process to make any sense, those who experience or observe possession episodes must be able to represent their own and other people’s minds as discrete entities whose identities can be revealed on the basis of complex signals⁷.

Third, the study of moral reasoning appears to reveal important recurrent features of religious thinking and behaviour. Supernatural agents do not simply supervise or monitor our behaviour, by means of their special powers; they punish us when we transgress and reward us when we behave well. Whereas rules of convention are highly variable cross-culturally, moral rules exhibit a number of seemingly universal features⁸, for instance the recognition that harming others is wrong⁹.

5. Bering 2006.

6. Boyer 2001; Barrett 2004.

7. Cohen 2005.

8. Turiel 1983.

Moral infractions are universally treated more seriously than violations of convention. Of special significance is the intuition that moral rules are not contingent on authority in the same way as rules of convention¹⁰. Moral thinking, together with the operation of ToM mechanisms, plays an especially prominent role in the way people manage their reputations in the eyes of others. Religious thinking provides unique opportunities for this kind of management, for instance by inhibiting antisocial behaviour (by postulating extranatural agents with special capacities to observe and punish wrongdoing) or by convincing others of one's moral fibre through costly displays of religious devotion or by providing means of restoring damaged reputations through mechanisms of confession, absolution, reconciliation, and expiation

History and Religious Variation

Research on the cognitive causes of religious diversity has meanwhile focused primarily on domain-general features of the human mind and, in particular, our unique capacities for creativity and the storage of innovations. Such research is now attempting to connect the universal religious repertoire, deriving from our evolutionary heritage, and the great diversity of religious thinking and behaviour, that arises from distinctive histories of innovation and transmission¹¹. Some religious representations, and systems of representations, are relatively hard to cognize or remember and thus require special care and attention (e.g. techniques of public reiteration or codification in sacred texts) if they are to endure¹².

Some features of religious thinking and behaviour that are unique to particular traditions or distributed only across some traditions and not others may be explainable in terms of differential emphasis on core fea-

9. Nichols 2004.

10. Nucci 1986.

11. See, for instance: Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004; Whitehouse and Martin 2004; Whitehouse and McCauley 2005.

12. For instance, recent experiments suggest that levels of repetition necessary for successful transmission of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism to naïve adults (non-Buddhist undergraduate students) are remarkably high (Whitehouse 2004: 84, fn.21).

tures of the universal repertoire, due to variable priming of the intuitive cognitive mechanisms that underpin those features. Other features, however, may run counter to universal, intuitive religiosity. Their invention would require highly innovative kinds of creative thinking and special forms of pedagogic support and external mnemonics in order to be successfully transmitted. One of the most elaborated attempts to explain how these aspects of religion come to be codified and transmitted is provided by the theory of divergent 'modes of religiosity': doctrinal and imagistic¹³.

Where religious ideas and practices are frequently repeated, there is considerable potential for the transmission of those ideas and practices across a wide area, through the efforts of proselytizing leaders of various kinds. Frequency of rehearsal is important here because it allows elaborate practices and complex strings of ideas to be thoroughly embedded in memory and thus somewhat insulated from garbling and forgetting. Religious teachings transmitted through routinized oratory and sermonizing can develop into highly counterintuitive bodies of knowledge that would otherwise be extremely difficult to learn and recall. The emphasis on oration facilitates the appointment of expert orators, prestigious individuals who are accorded authority on matters of doctrine. Their ability to address large audiences and to delegate the task of policing the orthodoxy to trusted students, opens the way for wide dissemination and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Solidarity in the religious community stems from the realization that many (largely anonymous) others share the same (typically very distinctive) beliefs and practices, forming a sprawling 'imagined community'. So closely bound up are these variables that one can predict that all highly routinized religious traditions will tend over time to spread widely and develop hierarchical patterns of leadership, encompassing large anonymous communities. This tendency can be glossed the 'doctrinal mode of religiosity'.

Very different patterns of religious learning and political association emerge from ritual practices that are rarely performed. In the vast majority of cases, infrequent rituals are also very emotional occasions and the principal reason for this is that if these occasions were not highly arous-

13. Whitehouse 1995, 2000, 2004.

ing they would be eminently forgettable and inconsequential, contributing little or nothing to religious experience. By stimulating our emotions, infrequent ritual leave a lasting mark on memory, and provide a focus point for subsequent reflection on matters of exegesis and cosmology. But the kinds of revelations that result from this type of religious transmission tend to be intensely personal and difficult to transmit directly to others (at least in the absence of routinized oratory, as found in the doctrinal mode). This is not necessarily a recipe for atomistic individualism, however. Solidarity, often of an intensely cohesive sort, arises from the experience of undergoing arousing rituals together. The endurance of such bonds arises from the indelible recollection of those who shared the same experience as a group. Religious identity is therefore particularistic and typically localized, being virtually impossible to extend to a community of anonymous others. This concatenation of features can be glossed the ‘imagistic mode of religiosity’.

Cognitive theories and the study of Graeco-Roman religions

A key question addressed in this volume is whether the patterns outlined above can be discerned in religious traditions that died out many centuries ago, and perhaps even used to explain their patterns of emergence and transformation over time. For instance, is the evidence available on ancient religious traditions sufficiently detailed to enable us to say whether or not the features of religious codification, transmission, and social morphology cluster in the manner predicted by the modes theory or, to the contrary, conform more closely to universal patterns of thinking and behaviour associated with cognitively optimal religious transmission? And if we can answer these kinds of questions adequately, can the resulting knowledge be used to explain how, why, and perhaps even when religious traditions change over time?

Such issues have been addressed head-on by scholars of Roman religion, for instance in Douglas Gragg’s (2004) characterization of this complex and changing tradition as an ‘assemblage of cognitively optimal practices’. Gragg’s argument hinged on the apparent lack of elaborated doctrine and by extension the absence of a fully elaborated doctrinal mode of religiosity. In this volume, however, a rather different picture

has emerged. Luther Martin, Alison Griffith, Aleš Chalupa, and Anders Lisdorf, each in somewhat different ways, argue that Roman state rituals collectively exemplify a doctrinal mode of operation. Despite the apparent absence of elaborated bodies of explicit teachings, Roman religion had many (and possibly all) the other hallmarks of the doctrinal mode. As Griffith notes in some detail, the Romans were preoccupied with the correct performance of an astonishingly wide variety of rituals, especially sacrificial rites. Following some recent reflections on the topic by anthropologist Gilbert Lewis (2004), Alison Griffith wonders whether the concern of many Romans with (what she calls) ‘correct, flawless performance’ of sacrificial rites is symptomatic of the doctrinal mode of religiosity. Not in itself perhaps but Griffith, Chalupa and Lisdorf all demonstrate convincingly that many of the other variables that comprise the doctrinal mode were present in Roman State religion. So the crunch question is why at least one of the hallmark features of the doctrinal mode, the presence of a highly elaborated and standardized body of religious teachings, apparently never became established (with the later exception, of course, of Christianity), if indeed it did not¹⁴.

The seeming lack of religious orthodoxy in Roman religion, notwithstanding the obvious obsession with orthopraxy, remains a puzzle. A highly routinized ritual system standardized across a very large population and heavily policed by recognized authorities had obvious potential to promulgate a set of standardized teachings. Why did such a process fail to take off in an empire otherwise obsessed with ideological control of its citizenry? If we take the lack of any orthodoxy as given, however, a rather different set of questions emerges. According to the modes theory, explicit doctrine (in routinized traditions) is important for motivational reasons. Why carry out the same rituals, day after day and week after week, if nobody can provide a sensible rationale for doing so? The lack of an extended body of exegesis and doctrinal justification suggests a certain fragility in the system.

This fragility has been noted in also in comparative ethnography. Whereas the imagistic mode often occurs in a rather pure form, with no need for support from extraneous mechanisms, the doctrinal mode tends

14. For an alternative view see Martin 2005.

to be vulnerable to collapse. If religious teachings are too poorly elaborated and loosely monitored, as appears to have been the case in Roman religion, they tend to be supplanted by cognitively optimal forms. This may help to account for Gragg's characterization of the situation. If, by contrast, they are too vigorously policed, the tedium effect and lowered morale tend to result in defection or splintering. Consequently, all enduring doctrinal traditions require an appropriate level of policing of their doctrinal rationales and are always eager to incorporate methods of countering the potentially deleterious effects of this on morale. One of the commonest adaptations to these requirements is the establishment of at least some relatively low-frequency, high-arousal rituals and in some cases the emergence of full-blown imagistic dynamics. This seems to have been a recurrent feature of religious life in Roman times.

The cults of Dionysus, Isis/Sarapis, Cybela and Attis, and the Bacchanalia display all the characteristics of the imagistic mode. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the available data present significant methodological challenges. To take just one of the core features of the imagistic mode, namely the tendency for ritual participants to engage in prolonged and revelatory processes of 'spontaneous exegetical reflection', it soon becomes clear that the historical sources, though highly suggestive are also inevitably uncertain.

Panayotis Pachis suggests that surviving iconography and textual sources pertaining to the cult of Isis point to considerable multivocality (and presumably also multivalence) of ritual imagery, and the promulgation of heterogeneous exegetical speculation. In a similar vein, Giovanni Casadio argues that the rich visual imagery associated with the cult of Dionysus defies any simple or shared interpretation and must have evoked at least as much exegetical diversity in the 1st Century BC as it has among scholars gazing upon remnants of the cult today (who after all are highly motivated, for rather different reasons, to decipher and crack the code). Nevertheless, Anders Lisdorf gives us some insight into the methodological challenges of investigating processes of SER in relation to ancient and long-extinct practices. In the case of Cybele and Attis religion, as in many others, surviving textual sources were produced by onlookers rather than by insiders. Nevertheless, one ancient writer, Ovid, actually seems to have interviewed a Cybele priest, who

proffered mythology rather than direct interpretation. This, incidentally, is reminiscent of the behaviour of ritual experts in extant religious traditions dominated by the imagistic mode. If exegesis is available at all (and often it is shared only in secret), it typically takes the form of cryptic narrative. But as with contemporary cults that can actually be observed from within, for instance by researchers in the role of participant observer, there is no sure fire method of directly accessing the spontaneous interpretations of cult adherents. Interviews provide no guarantee of access, particularly in circumstances where verbal transmission of ritual meanings does not occur naturally. Still, in some respects the evidence left by ancient cults is just as robust as that available to ethnographers in the field. As Lisdorf shows, one can examine degrees of uniformity of ritual imagery and cultic iconography across space and (rather more effectively than the ethnographic method) track patterns of transformation over time. On these grounds, Lisdorf, Pachis, and Casadio all infer evidence of idiosyncratic interpretation consistent with SER rather than with doctrinal instruction and the maintenance of religious orthodoxy.

Despite these sorts of challenges, cognitive approaches, like that presented by the modes theory, can legitimately influence what we are looking for, and to some extent, therefore, what we find, in the historiographical or archaeological record. For instance, it now seems increasingly likely that the search for as-yet-undiscovered bodies of doctrinal knowledge in ancient mystery cults may be misdirected. This argument seems to be neatly echoed in Giovanni Casadio's erudite discussion of the cult of Dionysus. In reflecting on exegetical challenges posed by the Villa of the Mysteries, Casadio warns that no single orthodoxy is likely to have existed and we can say this with increasing confidence at least partly as a result of the theory of imagistic transmission, to which Dionysian practices would seem to conform.

Arguably an even more important question, however, is whether cognitive theories can help to explain patterns of historical transformation. There is clearly scope for further work in this area, in light of the evidence from Graeco-Roman antiquity. One scholar who addresses the issue head on is Gragg – particularly in his attempts to explain the Roman senate's determination to suppress the Bacchanalia, after decades of

relative tolerance towards its members and their practices. Gragg argues that the Bacchanalia came to pose a genuine threat to State authority because of its imagistic dynamics, and thus its capacity to generate cohesion within potentially subversive ritual groups. It is tempting to draw an analogy between this line of argument and Ernest Gellner's pendulum-swing theory of Islam (1969). According to the latter, the history of the Muslim world conforms to a repetitive pattern in which urban dynasties are periodically overthrown by rural tribes. Gellner's general account of urban religion in the Muslim world emphasizes many key features of the doctrinal mode, whereas he envisaged rural religion as thoroughly imagistic. Because of its imagistic traditions rural tribes had far greater cohesion than city dwelling elites. This cohesion could be used to great effect in periodic military coups. But once a new dynasty had been established in the city, its cohesion would eventually ebb away in the fact of routinization and tedium effect, opening the way for another coup mounted by rural tribes (whose imagistic practices remained intact). Gellner did not of course use the terminology of the modes theory, but the general outline of his argument fits neatly with it. There seems to me to be real potential for exploring this general model of Islam vis-à-vis the history of classical civilizations through the lens of the modes theory.

Conclusion

The chapters in this volume build substantially on previous debates concerning the extent to which historians' knowledge of ancient religions can be enhanced by, and can in turn contribute to, cognitive theories of religion, of which the theory of divergent 'modes of religiosity' constitutes a recent example.

One reason why, among various other cognitive approaches to the study of religion, the modes theory has attracted particular attention from historians is arguably that it constitutes an attempt to explain socio-cultural variability and transformation rather than universal or widespread recurrence. Historians, like anthropologists, are first and foremost interested in the nature and causes of specific rather than general patterns in human thinking and behaviour. And to the extent that

the modes theory contributes to our understanding of these it may seem to have greater relevance to historiographical and ethnographic projects than theories in the cognitive science of religion concerned with generic features of 'human nature'. But as my own research into the causes of religious variation has unfolded it has become ever more obvious that heterogeneity is only understandable against a backdrop of homogeneity and recurrence. If history repeats itself that is at least partly because human nature is refractory to the shaping and constraining effects of changing environments, at least in certain respects (that we are only beginning to understand). Thus, the study of religious innovation and change must also and always be the study of continuity and reinvention. We may understandably marvel at the diversity of human cultural accomplishments, in religion as elsewhere, and rightly ask how and why they came to pass, but no adequate response to such questions can ignore the fact that the variation we behold is very often no more than variation on a theme.

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