

THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

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Cognitive scientists seek to explain the kinds of perceptual and conceptual representations—including “religious” representations—which the mental processing of sensory input allows, the memory, transmission, and transformations of these mental representations, and the relationships, historical and potential, among them. Although a cognitive science of religion was first proposed in 1980 (Guthrie), it was not until the following decade that systematically cognitive *theories* of religion began to be proposed. These theories focused largely on religious ritual (Lawson-McCauley 1990), religious ideas (Guthrie 1993; Boyer 1994), religious persistence (Whitehouse 1995; 2000), and the relationship of these practices and ideas to evolutionary theory (Mithen 1996). These theoretical proposals have produced—and are continuing to produce—a large number of works that now firmly establish this new field of inquiry as an exciting new approach to the study of religion. (e.g., Barrett 2000, 2004; Boyer 2001; Pyysiäinen 2001; McCauley-Lawson 2002; Atran 2002; Pyysiäinen-Anttonen 2002; Martin 2003; Slone 2004; Malley 2004; Whitehouse 2004).

One of the cognitive theories of religion that has generated a significant amount of commentary and research—and that is the primary focus of this special issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*—is that of divergent modes of religiosity, proposed by the British anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse (and summarized in this journal by him, 2002). Briefly stated, Whitehouse has identified two different clusters of variables that tend to be selected for in processes of religious transmission (Whitehouse 2004). He terms these two modes of religiosity “imagistic” and “doctrinal”. It need be emphasized at the outset that the “imagistic” mode does not refer, in Whitehouse’s description, to religious traditions that trade in images—a trait of virtually all religions. Rather, “imagistic” is Whitehouse’s designation for a convergence of analogical precepts and practices that are transmitted through infrequently performed rituals and are rendered especially salient and memorable through intense sensory pageantry and heightened emotionality. The dramatic, often traumatic, means of transmission (e.g., by some initiation rites) typically occasions a personal and spontaneous exegesis of that knowledge among its recipients as well as an enduring cohesion

among its participants in small, face-to-face communities. By contrast, Whitehouse contends that an alternative clustering of variables characterize a “doctrinal” mode of religiosity. The style of codification of knowledge in this mode is formulated digitally or discursively as a coherent and authorized body of beliefs or teachings that are widely transmissible by means of repetitive instruction and routinized ritual. While this modality may be found in non-literate contexts, it is most often characteristic of literate societies or of those influenced by them. The wide dissemination of knowledge that is characteristic of this mode of religiosity is facilitated by a dynamic and centralized leadership, and is constitutive of large, imagined communities in which group affinities are largely anonymous.

The two modes of religiosity proposed by Whitehouse rely on and are constrained by different and selective systems of memory. The memory system selected is determined by the alternative ways in which cultural knowledge is encoded and by the different forms of ritual practices. The catechetical instruction in and repetitive reinforcement of beliefs that are characteristic of the doctrinal mode of religiosity become encoded as generalized schemas of knowledge in the explicit memory system and they rely upon this generalizing system for their coherent transmission. The unique and personalized experiences characteristic of the imagistic mode are, on the other hand, encoded in episodic or autobiographical memory and rely upon the activation of this system for a specifically religious knowledge “revealed” as a significant cohesion of personal associations.

Specific theoretical proposals, such as that by Whitehouse, require, in turn, assessments by those pursuing research and teaching in the fields upon which the theories impinge. Three international symposia have been held to assess Whitehouse’s modes theory and publications of their findings are forthcoming. The first of these symposia was held for anthropologists at King’s College, Cambridge in 2001 (Whitehouse-Laidlaw 2004); a second was held for archaeologists, historians, and historians of religion at the University of Vermont in 2002 (Whitehouse-Martin 2004; Martin-Whitehouse, forthcoming); and a third was held for cognitive and developmental psychologists in 2003 at Emory University (Whitehouse-McCauley, forthcoming). These symposia were generously funded by grants from the British Academy, from The John Templeton Foundation, and from the host institutions.

As a follow-up to the 2002 Vermont symposium, a panel was organized for the 2002 annual meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Religion in Toronto on the “Implications of the ‘Modes

of Religiosity Theory' for the Study of Religion". The papers presented to this panel by Greg Alles, William Paden, Ted Vial and Donald Wiebe form the basis of this special issue of *MTSR*.

In addition to the papers first presented at the 2002 NAASR panel, we have also included in this special issue contributions by Kimmo Ketola, Benson Saler, and Matthew Day. Ketola's contribution was originally presented at the 2001 "modes" symposium at King's College, Saler's contribution was first delivered in 2000 at the University of Turku and Åbo. All of these papers have been revised for this special issues; Day's is an original contribution invited for this issue. Harvey Whitehouse has graciously revised and expanded his response to this panel to include the larger scope of the present issue. Finally, a review article of recent publications in this new cognitive science of religion by Ilkka Pyysiäinen concludes this special issue of the journal.

We offer these papers as a contribution to on-going conversations about the significance of cognitive science for the study of religion, conversations that have grown exponentially over the past four years from the specialized symposia and from several early NAASR panels, to panels at the 2000 Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the Study of Religion (with several currently being planned for the 2005 Congress), to the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2002, and, most recently, at the 2003 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (with several being planned for 2004). This conversation continues in print in a dedicated journal (*Journal of Cognition and Culture*) and in a dedicated series (*Cognitive Science of Religion Series*, AltaMira Press). Systematic research in the cognitive science of religion is currently being pursued in the context of several newly funded research initiatives—at Aarhus University, Denmark, at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and at the newly founded Institute for Cognition and Culture at Queen's University, Belfast. We invite any who may be interested in this growing and scientifically promising new direction—a direction envisioned by the nineteenth-century founders of the field as an academic study—to contribute to these conversations and research agendas, many of which are joined in this issue of *MTSR*.

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