Theorizing Religions Past   13

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L IKE ALL DOMAINS OF CULTURE, religious life is extremely complex, multi-
faceted, and riddled with paradox and contradiction. If our aim is to try to
grasp and empathize with religious experience in all its rich subtlety and
variation, the task is an enormous one—even if we restrict ourselves to the study
of a single religious tradition within a tightly circumscribed region and historical
period. As a kind of shorthand, we could call this the challenge of description and
interpretation, though this is not to imply the presence of a single methodology
(indeed, many methodologies, or combinations of them, are possible in this kind
of project).

   As noted at the beginning of this book both by E. Thomas Lawson (chapter
1) and Luther H. Martin (chapter 2), explanatory approaches face a different kind
of challenge. Here, it does not matter if there are features of religious action, feel-
ing, thought, or sensation that fall outside the ambit of a particular theory. What
matters is that the variables with which the theory is concerned conform to pat-
terns of relationships that the theory predicts and that all this is formulated in
such a way that we could agree on what would constitute counterevidence with re-
gard to the theory's predictions. Such an agenda may be alien to many historians,
as it is also to many anthropologists. Where descriptive and explanatory projects
confront one another, there is always a considerable risk of producing intractable
disputes because the terms of the two kinds of projects are simply incommensu-
rable.

   The theory of modes of religiosity does not pretend to supply an exhaustive
explanation of all aspects of religious life. Its concern is only to explain certain
aspects of transmission and social organization in religious traditions in terms of
a set of underlying patterns of cognitive processing. It seems to me that the pre-
dictions of the modes theory, as originally formulated, have so far withstood the

tests of ethnographers (see Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004) and of historians and archaeologists (in the present book). The range of ethnographic and historical regions covered in these two books, however, is relatively small. A comprehensive survey would have run into many more volumes and may have thrown up more problematic cases. But the thrust of the evidence we have on the table suggests that the modes dynamics are widespread and robust. Where problems seem to arise most prominently is in relation to the presence of features that were not originally anticipated or that seem to involve the mixing of elements from both the doctrinal and imagistic modes.

Mixed Modes?

According to my original formulation (Whitehouse 1995, 2000), doctrinal and imagistic modes are like oil and water: if they occur together within a single tradition, they remain discernibly separate as domains of operation. One of the most vocal challenges from ethnography, however, has been that religious traditions dominated by the doctrinal mode also may incorporate some elements of the imagistic mode (Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004). This has been a recurrent theme in the present book as well—figuring prominently, for instance, in the chapters by Anne Clark, Ted Vial, Ulrich Berner, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Donald Wiebe.

Consider the case of monastic religious life in the late Middle Ages, discussed with great erudition by Anne Clark (chapter 8). Here, we have evidence for the stable reproduction of a full-blown doctrinal mode of religiosity: routinized transmission and heavy emphasis on verbal and textual codification of a religious orthodoxy, coupled with expansionary, centralizing, and hierarchical dynamics. Although Clark does not explicitly identify all the key variables necessary to confirm the presence of a doctrinal mode of operation, it seems rather likely that the precise concatenation of elements predicted by the modes theory is in fact to be found in medieval monasteries.

Nevertheless, in addition to the predicted variables, Clark identifies the presence of other patterns of religious activity that are not predicted to be essential elements of the doctrinal mode and, yet, would seem to have significant implications for the reproduction of doctrinal-mode elements. The main activities Clark identifies might be characterized as relatively low-frequency epiphanic episodes, usually taking the form of visions or other extraordinary interactions with the divine. Clark stresses that these episodes are quite widely distributed and could therefore have a significant impact on religious meaning and motivation for many (perhaps a majority) of those leading a monastic life in the Middle Ages. The modes theory, of course, does not exclude the possibility of other elements impinging on religious life as well. It only makes the positive prediction that there

will be a tendency for certain variables to cluster in a stipulated manner. Clarke's data support that prediction with regard to monastic Christianity, and she offers no alternative explanation for the predicted coalescence of variables. Still, it would be nice to explain the additional features that she identifies.

According to my original formulation, the doctrinal mode is inherently vulnerable to the tedium effect. The cause of this is quite straightforward: arousal broadly correlates inversely with performance frequency, a principle that seems to be well supported in the study of religious rituals cross-culturally. It follows that all traditions in which the doctrinal mode coalesces will harbor selective pressures favoring the establishment of more highly motivating forms of religious experience. One direction in which such forms might develop is through the natural selection of more effective forms of oratory—typically, ones that have increasing levels of relevance to various aspects of daily life. Brian Malley has pioneered some important contributions to our theoretical and empirical knowledge in this area in his ethnographic research on Bible Baptists in Michigan (2004). But, all else being equal, there are also selective pressures in favor of more sensually evocative forms of religious activity, ranging from the banging of tambourines through to the diffusion of very high-arousal, revelatory episodes. On the face of it, this may look like the adoption of elements characteristic of the imagistic mode. And certainly this was a focus of considerable discussion among our colleagues in anthropology (see Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004). But, in fact, when high-arousal revelations occur as part of a doctrinal mode formation, they often establish effects that contrast very starkly with those found in the imagistic mode of religiosity.

Several issues are significant here, but perhaps the most important is that epiphanic experiences in the doctrinal mode tend to have a dual aspect. On the one hand, they specify information at encoding that may survive in long-term memory as a trigger to processes of spontaneous exegetical reflection (SER). On the other hand, they also tend to be subject to frequent, subsequent rehearsal as more or less formulaic narratives on the theme of conversion, miraculous intervention, visitations and visions, and so on. Clark notes evidence of precisely that pattern in medieval monastic life. It is crucial, however, to note that this latter pattern of cultural transmission is characteristically absent in the imagistic mode. Moreover, these rather special kinds of events that punctuate more routinized religious activity are seldom (if ever) collective experiences. They tend to strike lone individuals rather than groups and, so, are powerless to create the sort of localized group cohesion that typifies the imagistic mode. Thus, what appears to be a fusion or mixing of the two modes is really nothing of the sort. Since the two modes are clustered around fundamentally divergent dynamics, it follows that whenever they draw on a common stock of cognitive mechanisms, they do so in significantly contrasting ways.

Of course, the distinctions I am drawing here are relative rather than absolute. The doctrinal mode privileges verbal transmission of elaborate doctrine and exegesis over private rumination, but we are talking about differences of degree rather than kind. Not only do some imagistic adaptations seem to enhance the survival chances of religious activities based on the doctrinal mode, but as Ulrich Berner (chapter 10) rightly points out, the cognitive mechanisms underpinning doctrinal and imagistic modes are activated in different ways and to different degrees among religious individuals. Within a tradition dominated by the doctrinal mode, for instance, there might be some individuals who attach particular salience to personal revelatory experiences. While reflecting deeply on the significance of those experiences, they might accord rather little importance to authoritative teachings and display a limited grasp of the orthodox canon. Such individuals thus engage in patterns of thinking that are characteristic of the imagistic mode, even though the tradition to which they belong does not exhibit full-blown imagistic features, such as high-arousal, low-frequency collective rituals and concomitant patterns of group cohesion.

Berner and I might differ in our reading of the significance of this sort of individual variation. Berner is wary of generalization beyond the level of individual experience for fear of "reifying abstract concepts—speaking about religions as if they had intentions and acted like human beings" (**p. 000**). I too would be wary of according institutions agentive qualities (see Whitehouse 2003), but that is certainly not what is implied by a notion of modes of religiosity as distributed cognitive patterns that have effects discernible only at a population level. All this approach assumes is that general patterns of mentation and behavior can be analyzed as cumulative properties of the thoughts and actions of individuals. For instance, we can hypothesize that participation in routinized ritual has the effect of suppressing the rate and volume of SER in the minds of a specified number of individuals, whereas participation in very highly arousing and shocking rituals has the effect of increasing the rate and volume of SER in a specified population. Exceptional individual psychology is interesting, but not in any way calamatous, or even mildly problematic, for the modes model. Indeed, it may be very useful, for instance in explaining how certain forms of inspired or charismatic leadership come into being within routinized religious traditions. And it may even help us to predict variations in the appeal of imagistic-mode activities for different individuals (Berner, p. **000**; see also Gragg, p. **000**).

It will be noted that most attempts to furnish instances of mixed-mode phenomena are centered on traditions dominated by the doctrinal mode. Cases of religious traditions based on imagistic dynamics, and yet which incorporate some doctrinal-mode features, seem to be much thinner on the ground. It is possible, although by no means certain at this early stage, that this is because the imagistic

mode is inherently robuster. It is never endangered by the tedium effect, or, per-haps, by other debilitating influences that (as we see below) commonly threaten the doctrinal mode. Consequently, the imagistic mode makes little use of the mo-tivating gimmicks of doctrinal transmission (moving oratory, textual validation, reinforcement of belief through repetition, and so on). It may also be that in con-ditions of low-frequency transmission, the mechanisms of the doctrinal mode are simply impossible to deploy, for what enduring relevance could be attached to a speech or a text that is rarely encoded? There is no cause for complacency on this matter, however, as Roger Beck amply demonstrates (chapter 6). Beck's account of Greco-Roman Mithraism strongly suggests the presence of full-blown imagistic dynamics, and yet he identifies a number of features that seem to conform to a doctrinal-mode pattern. Once again, the specter of mixed modes seems to be raised, and in a rather exceptional way.

To a Melanesianist like myself, Beck's data on two Mithraic rituals are forcibly reminiscent of many aspects of New Guinea initiations, which of course have so far provided my most detailed examples of imagistic-mode dynamics (White-house 1992, 1995, 2000). Despite their distance in time and space, both kinds of traditions begin the process of induction into cult mysteries by assuming a quite widely disseminated common stock of cultural knowledge stored in semantic memory. In the case of Mithraism, a crucial part of that knowledge would seem to be what Beck calls "star-talk," a remarkably systematic body of astronomical ex-pertise. In the case of New Guinea fertility cults, an equivalent corpus would be that pertaining to the domain of zoology. Celestial systems and natural tax-onomies respectively provide somewhat fixed and shared reference points for the building of more esoteric and essentially mysterious religious knowledge.

The revelatory process, in circumstances like these, typically commences with ritual acts that are high in arousal, personally consequential, and in certain respects deeply surprising or puzzling. These are optimal conditions for the formation of flashbulb-memory effects. In the case of the "Archery of the Father" ritual in Mithraism, as in most New Guinea initiations, terror is induced by an act of mas-sive intimidation. But this intimidation is also one that violates normal cultural frames. One of the most obvious ways of doing that, perhaps, is to associate the role of torturer or intimidator with categories of close kin, real or fictive—particularly the role of father as in Mithraism or, in many parts of Melanesia, the maternal uncle. But a deeper process of puzzlement is also being triggered. New Guinea initiations encourage novices to believe that their everyday knowledge about the natural world (albeit extensive and complex) contains only the shadow of deeper mysteries. In Mithraism, it is apparently the novice's presumptuous con-fidence in his astronomical knowledge that comes under attack. What noninitiates know about the cosmos is revealed to be no more than the outward appearance of

a much more complex, and only partially penetrable, system. Although the corpus of nonesoteric celestial knowledge is not invalidated, it turns out to be only a collection of shallow truths, a veil. The revelation of deeper cosmological understandings occurs through processes of SER, in which episodic memory for low-frequency, high-arousal rituals plays a crucial part. As Beck puts it (p. **000**, emphasis removed): "The rituals and the elaborate material apparatus of Mithraism . . . instantiate not a doctrine, but a system of symbols, the apprehension of which by the initiate constitutes the mysteries."

This apprehension, however, is not simple and immediate—nor does it come to any final and satisfactory conclusion. It proceeds slowly, generating ever more elaborate semantic schemas over the course of a lifetime. It would be too much to expect ethnography or historiography to unveil fully the mechanisms that drive and shape such processes. Nevertheless, we can, as students of human culture, specify the conditions and contexts in which ritual meanings are generated and transmitted and with which our cognitive faculties for memory and analogical thinking are activated. Beck does this with exceptional depth and breadth of expertise.

So how does any of this raise the question of mixed modes? Mithraic cults bear all the classic hallmarks of the imagistic mode, at least if my reading of Beck's data are correct, and yet at the end of his chapter he seems ready to classify some aspects of Mithraism as doctrinal rather than imagistic. Beck reads me as saying that the presence of information stored in semantic memory belies the operations of the doctrinal mode. It seems to me, however, that no kind of religious tradition could get off the ground without semantic knowledge about the world.[1] What makes Mithraic cults and New Guinea initiations imagistic is the fact that they both use ritualization as a way of challenging a corpus of semantic knowledge. They do this by obliging people to form enduring and vivid episodic memories for deeply discomforting and puzzling rituals and by encouraging novices to believe that these ritual events contain clues to deeper layers of knowledge, accessible only through mystical personal rumination. In all these respects, Mithraism is unambiguously clustered around the imagistic attractor position, with no evidence that doctrinal mode features somehow mixed in.

Yet the issue of mixed modes also arises from Beck's account of the sociopolitical features of Mithraism. Patterns of leadership, spread, and standardization, he suggests, conform more closely to the doctrinal than the imagistic model. Here again, on closer inspection, we find that some of the problems are more apparent than real. The leaders of Mithraic cults are strongly reminiscent of ritual elders and experts in contemporary Melanesia and possess none of the qualities of dynamic leadership found among the messiahs, prophets, and priests of the doctrinal mode. And there are therefore no grounds to suppose that the leaders of these Greco-

Roman cults ever came to form a centralized religious authority, capable of monitoring and policing a religious orthodoxy across a wide region. Nevertheless, Beck's evidence does seem to me to raise a very interesting challenge in relation to patterns of spread and regional homogenization. Mithraism seemed to spread rather more easily and uniformly than the modes theory would predict. The reason seems to lie in the fact that the tradition was transported via large-scale, centralized military machinery, and so its imagistic dynamics were overridden by those of the Roman state. I consider below the question of whether the transmission of state values constituted an expression of doctrinal mode dynamics (suggesting that Mithraism formed part of the wider picture of contrasting modes, as argued by Luther Martin [2004]) or whether we need another kind of model to make sense of the Greco-Roman materials, as argued by Gragg in this book (chapter 5).

In sum, although the chapters by Clark and Beck support the predictions of the modes theory in a number of interesting ways, they also point to the presence of factors that lie outside the ambit of the original model and that would seem to have a major bearing on patterns of historical transformation. This becomes clearer still in some of the discussions of how modes of religiosity interact.

Interacting Modes?

It might be argued that although the imagistic mode is capable, at least in principle, of operating independently, the presence of a doctrinal mode presupposes the prior or simultaneous inputs of imagistic dynamics. This is suggested not only by the sequential emergence of modes of religiosity (imagistic first and doctrinal subsequently) in human history, but also by the simple fact that complex doctrine has to come from somewhere, and the imagistic mode provides the archetypal model for its production. Anita Leopold (chapter 7) argues at length that we can identify imagistic dynamics in early Christianity, specifically in second-century Gnosticism. In other words, Gnostic mysticism provided a body of revelatory knowledge that emergent doctrinal regimes later colonized and appropriated. Moreover, the reliance of the doctrinal mode on imagistic outputs might be seen as a permanent state of affairs rather than merely a formative developmental stage. These issues are raised in a number of ways by relatively recent European religious history.

Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity contains a somewhat tentative discussion of Christianity on the eve of the European Reformation, to which several chapters in this book present intriguing challenges. My hypothesis therein is that Christian laities in the Middle Ages had an incomplete version of the doctrinal mode in that they lacked a systematic corpus of religious knowledge necessary to motivate ongoing involvement. Instead, their religious lives were animated and motivated by forms of religious activity that gravitated toward the imagistic end of the spectrum.

Ted Vial (chapter 9) eloquently argues, however, that my argument was based on a rather too hasty projection of patterns underlying the development of new religious movements in twentieth-century Melanesia onto rather different (and frankly more complex) patterns of historical transformation in sixteenth-century Europe. The Melanesian model consisted of an oscillation between relatively long-term periods of routinized religious activity punctuated by periodic outbursts of imagistic splintering, triggered primarily by the tedium effect. The reabsorption of these splinter groups had the effect of rejuvinating the mainstream, routinized tradition, at least temporarily. Vial points out that such a model is only one of many possible interactions between splinter groups and mainstream traditions. In highlighting a number of others, Vial shows not only that established religion and its splinter groups can confront each other in a variety of ways, but that there are great risks in assuming that these confrontations map onto a notion of interacting modes of religiosity in any straightforward and obvious way. In sixteenth-century Europe there is precious little evidence of imagistic outbursts of the sort more recently observed in Melanesia. We have, Vial concedes, rather clear evidence of the doctrinal mode of religiosity in the practices of both Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century. But we also find a wide range of practices that occupy an uncertain position with respect to the modes theory—contributing neither to a doctrinal nor to an imagistic mode of operation, yet playing a prominent role in late medieval religious life and in the processes of transformation that engulfed it during and after the European Reformation. Excellent examples include what Vial calls "apotropaic uses of ritual objects" (p. **000**), which are neither high in arousal nor low in frequency, but which, at the same time, require and receive no elaborate exegesis or mnemonic support.

Ilkka Pyysiäinen (chapter II) develops a strikingly complementary line of argument. A great deal of religious activity and thought, he observes, is difficult to reconcile with the two attractor positions proposed by the modes theory. These aspects of religion may invite little in the way of elaborate rumination, but neither do they attract authoritative interpretation; they encompass rituals and other practices that are familiar, but not necessarily routinized; they may contain allusions to official doctrine, yet tend to condense and simplify it in the process. Pyysiäinen is referring here to the naturalness of much religious thinking and action—the fact that it does not require special pedagogical resources to acquire and pass on. The challenge is to connect this kind of transmission to rather more elaborate and costly operations of modes dynamics.

Intuitiveness and Ritualization

It has long been appreciated that some cultural representations are easier to acquire and pass on than others. In part, this has to do with the natural capabilities

and limitations of human cognition. Most normal humans would expend comparatively few cognitive resources learning to hum a simple melody, yet would find complex mathematical principles extremely challenging to process, apply, and recall. With most computers, the reverse is true (see Sperber 1996): complex mathematical manipulations may require minimal computational resources, whereas music rapidly clogs up the hard drive. And yet, humans have proven more successful than any other species in overcoming their cognitive limitations. Through techniques of regular rehearsal and practice, for instance, we are capable of acquiring conceptual frameworks that deliver inferences extremely remote from anything intelligible to our intuitive systems. As a result, culture consists of cognitively challenging concepts as well as more intuitive, cognitively optimal concepts. Let us begin with a brief survey of the role of cognitively optimal thinking in the domain of religion.

Much of religion is founded upon intuitive (or "minimally counterintuitive") cognition (see McCauley 2000). As Tom Lawson notes (chapter 1), we now have increasingly detailed accounts of the "naturalness" of this kind of religious thinking. Notions of supernatural agency, for instance, are easily triggered by mental architecture that is geared up for the detection of agency in general. Stewart Guthrie, for instance, who refers to this as "anthropomorphic" thinking (1980, 1993), has assembled a great wealth of evidence that humans overdetect signs of humanlike agency on the strength of minimal inputs (his book title, *Faces in the Clouds*, concisely conveys the point). Pascal Boyer (e.g., 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2001a, 2001b) has meanwhile led the way in showing how various kinds of concepts of supernatural agency minimally violate intuitive expectations and, so, are naturally easy to learn and recall. Just as certain notions of gods, ghosts, and witches are easily transmitted, so we find that particular features of ritual structure and content can be highly intuitive and, for that reason, easily acquired (see Fiske and Haslam 1997, Lawson and McCauley 1990, McCauley and Lawson 2002). And many other aspects of religious discourse, such as the uses of parable (see Turner 1996) or the teleological reasoning exhibited in creation myths (see Kelemen and Donovan 2003), incorporate features that are naturally easy to process and pass on.

At the same time, some forms of religious thinking are far from intuitive and may require a vast repertoire of pedagogic tools and mnemonic supports in order to be transmitted intact. To put it another way, some aspects of religion are cognitively costly (see Whitehouse 2004). Doctrinal systems typically place great value on the standardization of cognitively costly concepts and emphasize the dire consequences (whether real or imagined) of unauthorized innovation. Thus, we often find a profusion of what Justin Barrett (1999) has called "theologically correct" concepts in religion—the truth of which may be asserted with extraordinarily dogmatic insistence. Some religions, by contrast, foster active rumination on

questions of theological and ritual meaning. This is a particularly pronounced feature of the imagistic mode of religiosity, which triggers haunting memories for intrinsically mysterious and life-changing experiences and, thus, sets in train a seemingly unending process of intricate exegetical reflection.

In short, cultural concepts in general, and religious thinking in particular, are scattered across a spectrum adumbrating degrees of intuitiveness. At one end of the spectrum are extremely simple concepts (simple, that is, if you are equipped with a distinctively human mind) such as a notion of "ghost" or "parable." These sorts of concepts, since they are so easily learned and recalled, are found in all human populations the world over and have probably been around for as long as modern humans have roamed the planet. At the other end of the spectrum are maximally counterintuitive ideas, such as the hypotheses of quantum mechanics or of academic theology. For such concepts to be produced and passed on, massive institutional support is required: pedagogical (e.g., theories and methods of instruction), infrastructural (e.g., classrooms, libraries, equipment), motivational (e.g., systems of sanctions and incentives), and so on. Most of culture, including most of religion, is stretched across the intermediate range of the spectrum. It requires nothing so grand as a university, but it does demand more than a humble proclivity to see faces in the clouds. In short, it depends upon a set of socially regulated conditions for adequate rehearsal or arousal capable of stimulating feats of memory that surpass those of "natural" cognition.

If culture is a continuum, it is not only in terms of degrees of intuitiveness. Cultural knowledge is also graduated by degrees of ritualization. From middle childhood onwards, all normal human beings irresistibly hunt for possible intentions lurking behind the actions of others. Perhaps we are congenitally nosy creatures, but if we didn't constantly try to pry into the internal states of others, we would be unable to accomplish the extraordinary feats of communication and sociality that characterize our species (see Baron-Cohen 1995). Because of this attribute, we can cooperate in complex ways. We can entertain our friends, curry favor with our bosses, and lay traps for our enemies. What this requires is being attuned to the interests of other people and their likely perceptions of ourselves. This deceptively subtle, if compulsive, activity is confounded by actions that are closely stipulated in advance and, yet, are irreducible to any set of self-evident technical motivations. That is the essence of ritual.

A ritual is an action that cannot be tacitly attributed to the intentional states of the actor. If you try, you immediately run into problems. Consider the person who crosses herself with holy water. Clearly, this is not the same kind of action as washing one's hands or clothing. It may involve a sort of metaphorical cleansing, but that interpretation is different from a purely technical one. Nor does the idea originate in the actor herself. She performs that act because she has learned it from others and not because it suddenly occurred to her that this would be a novel and

desirable thing to do. Art, unlike ritual, expresses precisely that kind of novelty. It too is irreducible to technical motivations, but it bears the mark of creativity. For the artist, unlike the ritual actor, is the author of the idea. If we attribute rituals to a creator, then it is always after the event in a crucial psychological sense. For the act itself must have become disconnected from the intentions of those who perform it before it can be truly designated an act of ritual.

Degrees of ritualization and of intuitiveness together provide a method of carving up religious phenomena and may help to account for varying degrees of cultural plasticity more generally. At the maximally counterintuitive end of the spectrum, cultural knowledge can vary rather dramatically across time and space, since it is relatively unhampered by the constraints of natural cognition. By contrast, more cognitively optimal concepts (e.g., concerning intuitive ontology, social-causal cognition, etc.) would constitute a more stable and cross-culturally recurrent bridgehead of inferential engines and their outputs. In the case of religion, which is (in general) the most highly ritualized domain of culture (see figure 13.1), maximally counterintuitive concepts are the outcome, I would argue, of doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity.

Figure 13.1   Degrees of intuitiveness and ritualization in cultural systems.

Implications for Historical and Archaeological Evidence

We may now be in a better position to understand the inherent instability of the doctrinal mode and its consequences for patterns of religious transformation. We noted earlier that the doctrinal mode may be vulnerable to the tedium effect—that is, a lowering of morale due to high levels of repetition. We have already identified at least three ways in which that problem might be addressed. One might be dubbed the "Melanesian solution": periodic reinvigoration of the mainstream tradition via imagistic splintering. Vial points out that this is not a prominent feature of European religious history, however. Another possible solution to the tedium effect is to increase the relevance of heavily repeated doctrine, along the lines described by Malley (2004, see above). A third way out is to adopt the kinds of high-arousal, revelatory practices described by Clark in her discussion of medieval monasticism. This involves a kind of "domestication" of imagistic strategies by the doctrinal mode, insofar as the revelatory experiences are mostly solitary, rather than collective, and the emphasis is on publicly stereotyped meanings rather than privately fabricated ones, thus privileging the interests of doctrinal reproduction over doctrinal invention. All these problems and their solutions[2] stem from what we might refer to as the "overpolicing" of doctrinal orthodoxy, at least partly through the heavy reiteration of cardinal principles and practices. But the doctrinal mode exhibits rather different vulnerabilities in circumstances of "underpolicing," for instance where transmissive frequency falls below a certain level necessary for effective learning and consolidation of complex, theologically correct teachings or for the triggering of salience/relevance effects. This is when the cognitive optimum effect kicks in and leads to a dumbing down or "naturalizing" of the religious orthodoxy. Such a scenario has often provided the stimulus for movements of reform and religious revival in European religious traditions, as Pyysiäinen observes in detail. All this suggests that the doctrinal mode is not a static model for religious transmission, but a suite of variables that operate in dynamic tension, with potentially predictable consequences for patterns of splintering and historical transformation. We have much more ground to cover in formulating specific predictions and owe a particular debt of gratitude to Pyysiäinen in illuminating the way forward, but we are now heading in a direction that should in principle lead to a fuller explanation for the twists and turns of religious history, not only in Europe but elsewhere.

Consider, for instance, Douglas Gragg's discussion of Roman religion as an assemblage of "cognitively optimal" practices (chapter 5). According to Pyysiäinen's formula, such conditions should be ripe for movements of doctrinal reform, and this is precisely what Gragg describes—a set of "protodoctrinal" tendencies "with the potential of developing into an example of full-blown doctrinal modality un-

der the right set of pressures" (p. **000**). We know of at least one instance of such a development toward the end of the classical era, namely the establishment and official incorporation of Christianity. But that still leaves the problem of explaining why a full-blown doctrinal mode did not take hold as the dominant mode of religious organization and transmission throughout the history of the ancient Roman world. How did a vast, centralized polity, in other respects obsessed with control, come to exhibit such lack of interest in regulating and policing the religious practices and representations of its citizenry, at least during major portions of its history?

Although an adequate answer to that question lies beyond the scope of my expertise, and perhaps also of the modes theory as currently constituted, we can at least follow Gragg in explaining the success of Roman mystery cults with reference to imagistic dynamics. Gragg implicitly agrees with my interpretation of Beck's data on Mithraism as an exemplar of the imagistic mode and extends this argument to a much wider range of cases. Leopold likewise emphasizes the imagistic character of mystery cults in antiquity and also of Gnosticism in the second century. Yet Leopold goes further still. Gnostic cults, dominated by imagistic dynamics, were hotbeds of cosmological rumination—through their revelatory activities, they generated a wealth of complex religious ideas that were eventually susceptible to fixation through the routinized practices of the doctrinal mode. This appears to have underpinned the success of early Christianity. But it once again raises the question of why similar recodifications of imagistic revelation were not present (if indeed they were not) throughout antiquity. Clearly, this is an issue for classicists and ancient historians to resolve.

The Origins of Modes of Religiosity

As Donald Wiebe points out (chapter 12), the cognitive capacities required for the formation of doctrinal and imagistic modes are present in all human beings and have been for many millennia. Why, then, should one of these modes (the imagistic) emerge first in human prehistory and the other (doctrinal) become established only relatively recently with the growth of the early states? To explain this evolution we must have recourse to mechanisms outside the modes theory itself. For instance, we might seek to identify the factors that first gave rise to very much shorter cycles of transmission in the domain of religion and ritual and, thus, fostered the standardization of religious teachings across wide areas. Whatever those factors turn out to be, it will also be necessary to show that they were not activated during thousands of years of prior experimentation in the domain of religion, when the repertoire was apparently confined to imagistic or cognitively optimal practices. The need to look beyond the modes theory for a solution to

this problem is, in Weibe's view, a serious defect. His concern here focuses partly on a rather narrow concept of causality, however, wherein "causes" appear to be construed as sufficient conditions. But even in simple mechanical processes, we use the notion of causation more liberally. We say, for instance, that the engine of a car causes it to accelerate and yet we also know that an engine is not a sufficient cause of the car's propulsion. We must also have a road, a driver, a system of gears that connects the revolving drive shaft to the wheels, and so on. And it is possible to imagine circumstances in which a perfectly functional car is doomed to immobility, for instance because of a lack of roads. Until about 6,000 years ago, the doctrinal mode was rather like a car without a network of roads to drive along. Something happened that made a new kind of traveling possible, some shift in the ecology of religious life.

One possibility, explored elsewhere by Pascal Boyer (2001a, 2002) and Jack Goody (2004), is that the doctrinal mode was kickstarted by the advent of literacy. The appeals of this hypothesis are obvious. First, there is the argument of covariance: literacy seems to appear roughly around the same time as the doctrinal mode, and there are very few historical or contemporary cases of a religious tradition dominated by the doctrinal mode that does not either base its teachings around texts or model itself on another tradition which clearly does so. Second, there is the argument of standardization: religious guilds seeking to establish doctrinal uniformity could use writing as a means of stabilizing the canon, enabling them to squeeze out competitors in the religious market who lacked these methods of ideological regulation. Such arguments, however, raise, but do not resolve, the historical and logical priority of literacy in the emergence of the doctrinal mode.

In *Arguments and Icons*, I suggest that one of the most striking changes in religious ecology, aside from the development of writing systems, that seems to have accompanied the first appearance of the doctrinal mode in a number of locations, was a massive increase in the scale and frequency of agricultural rituals, occasioned by major technological and demographic changes at the time. It is possible that this, rather than the advent of literacy, is what primarily triggered the earliest emergence of routinized orthodoxies. The homogenization of a regional tradition required, first and foremost, a method of transmitting (acquiring, remembering, and passing on) complex, standardized teachings. Although literacy may have rapidly come to the aid of such projects, the latter's initial appearance and flowering need not have depended upon that. Indeed, the doctrinal mode may have been a major stimulus for the development of writing systems, rather than the other other way around.

Interestingly, the material presented in this book by Steven Mithen (chapter 3) and Karen Johnson (chapter 4) would seem to support this last interpretation

rather than the Goody/Boyer position. Mithen suggests that the doctrinal mode may have appeared in western Asia as early as 8,000 to 10,000 years ago in a period classified by archaeologists as the Levantine Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, where we see the first evidence of centralization and regional homogeneity in religious practices and beliefs. During this period, Mithen goes on to observe, "There are no traces of literacy, although D. Schmandt-Besserat . . . argued that geometric clay tokens used at 'Ain Ghazal provided the foundation from which writing systems developed" (p. **000**). Johnson too suggests that the doctrinal mode predates the development of writing systems on the Susiana Plain (specifically at Choga Mish and Susa) approximately 7,000 years ago. She writes

With respect to the sociopolitical features of Choga Mish and Susa, it appears that Whitehouse's model should predict a religious tradition that is more doctrinal in nature: the social cohesion was likely diffuse across the Susiana Plain; leadership was certainly dynamic through the cycling of chiefdoms into a state-level society; the communities were arguably inclusive in the attempt to exert influence over greater areas; the spread certainly seems efficient; large-scale accurately describes the sphere of authority; the degree of uniformity is admittedly difficult to discern; and the structure is obviously centralized. Yet, systems of writing are noticeably absent. (p. **000**):

Obviously, these kinds of conclusions are drawn tentatively on the basis of fragmentary data. Both Mithen and Johnson discuss the methodological challenges faced by archaeologists in seeking to make use of the modes theory and other theories like it that were not originally designed with a material evidence in mind. Mithen observes, for instance, that few if any of the activities associated with contemporary Melanesian initiation practices, which I have frequently used to illustrate core features of the imagistic mode, would survive in the archaeological record. Indeed, it is tempting to say that the absence of material remains associated with ritual practices is potentially a diagnostic feature of the imagistic mode. High-arousal, low-frequency rituals are usually secret and any ritual paraphernalia liable to destruction immediately after use. In the face of these sorts of problems, Johnson searches ingeniously for solutions, postulating a variety of indirect indicators of relative levels of ritual frequency and doctrinal standardization. Ultimately, it is work of this sort, rather than armchair theorizing per se, that holds the key to discovering of the origins of modes dynamics.

Epilogue

In closing, it seems appropriate to offer a very brief comment on the question of what constitutes religion. This issue was repeatedly raised in our conference at the University of Vermont, from which this book emerged, but seems to have largely

faded from the agenda as participants have revised their papers for publication. What, in short, is the theory of modes of religiosity intended to be a theory of. To some extent, I fear this may be a red herring, and perhaps others have also come to that conclusion, but this is all the more reason to pin down the matter and put it to bed. Religion is not a phenomenon, like a new species or organism or a distant galaxy, waiting to be discovered. Religion is whatever we agree to say it is. For my part, I should be happy to agree on a minimal Tylorian definition that identifies religion as any set of practices that presupposes the presence of one or more supernatural beings.

Having religion, in the sense of having recourse to supernatural explanations for processes and events, does not necessarily require the activation of modes of religiosity. Indeed, as we have seen, the invocation of spirits and deities, the performance of rituals, and the transmission of myths can be as natural as smiling or blinking and would thus require no special training or mnemonic support. Modern humans, and probably also some of our premodern ancestors and cousins, have always had religion. But having religious coalitions—cults, churches, totemic groups, and the like— invariably requires the elaboration of modes dynamics. In the imagistic mode, cohesive ritual groupings irrevocably mark off their membership from those who are not (or cannot) be party to the weighty and mysterious knowledge of the initiated or enlightened. The emergence of such religious traditions does not require the presence of literate guilds and probably predates the invention of literacy by many millennia (see above). On the other hand, the large "imagined communities" that emerge with the development of the doctrinal mode are clearly more recent. Although it appears roughly around the time that early writing systems were invented, the truth is we do not yet know whether literacy caused or somehow fostered the creation of the doctrinal mode or the other way around. But what does seem to be clear is that having "a" religion, whether in the sense of belonging to a small, exclusivistic cult or a large, inclusivistic church, requires the presence of imagistic or doctrinal modes of religiosity. Once both modes of religiosity are firmly established in the cultural repertoire, they are clearly hard to shift. And part of the success of religions that draw upon these organizational principles is that they never wholly or permanently commit to one or the other. One of the greatest remaining challenges for this area of research is to survey the range of ways in which modes of religiosity interact and to specify with greater precision how the vulnerabilities of the doctrinal mode are overcome and the strengths of the imagistic mode harnessed by coalitions not of their own making.

Notes

1. A similar misunderstanding is apparent in Wiebe's critique (chapter 12).

2. Despite my somewhat functionalist language here, I should emphasize that we are dealing with processes of selection rather than of mechanistic causation. What works survives, but that does not mean that institutional innovation is driven (in the sense of intelligently motivated) by a deliberate search for workable arrangements.

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