

## Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion

## II

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THE CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS VOLUME HAVE AT TURNS supported and challenged various aspects of the “modes theory.” They have compared and evaluated it against other theories of religion and ritual. And they have advanced a range of solutions to existing problems while, in many cases, opening up a number of new ones.

In support of the modes theory, regional specialists have collectively demonstrated the global recurrence of bifurcating tendencies associated with doctrinal and imagistic modes respectively. They have done so by picking out the ebb and flow of modes dynamics across diverse populations and over substantial periods of time. Especially impressive, in this regard, are the chapters by J. D. Y. Peel, David Shankland, Jack Goody, Brian Malley, Leo Howe, James Laidlaw, Susan Bayly, and Christian Højbjerg. Although by no means straightforwardly endorsing the model, these authors have collectively demonstrated that it is fruitfully generalizable, that many of its principal predictions with regard to the broad coalescence of divergent sets of features (concerning transmission, codification, memory, and social morphology) are on the right track. Indeed, this point has been emphasized with considerable generosity throughout the book. But the theory, as expounded in *Arguments and Icons*, clearly has problems as well. These problems, it turns out, are of two main kinds.

First, as Maurice Bloch and Gilbert Lewis argue at some length, the modes theory (Whitehouse 1995, 2000) was insufficiently precise about such matters as proper measures of frequency and units of analysis. In order to be rendered in a systematically testable fashion, the theory’s predictions and methods of investigation needed to be formulated more exactly and transparently.

Second, as many contributors have stressed, the modes theory at best explained only certain aspects of what we find “on the ground.” Much religious activity and

experience appears to fall outside the ambit of the model. We find abundant examples of religious traditions dominated by the doctrinal mode that nevertheless incorporate low-frequency, high-arousal forms of religious experience. In his discussion of various forms of Balinese Hinduism, Howe observes that Sai Baba devotionism is “characterized by large-scale, anonymous, imagined communities and a globally constituted identity,” indicative of the doctrinal mode, and yet it entails practices that evince “high emotional arousal” (p. 000). Malley makes a very similar point with regard to evangelical Christianity in North America. In the case he discusses, we find intense ritual ordeals that become the focus of elaborate, frequently rehearsed discourse. Moreover, such a pattern is found more widely. Laidlaw, for instance, reports on ritual ordeals within Jainism that, while highly arousing and personally consequential, are interpreted in classic doctrinal-mode fashion, rather than becoming a locus for “spontaneous exegetical reflection.” Peel has suggested that we envisage modes of religiosity as standing in a kind of dynamic tension, prefiguring rather than merely excluding each other. This accords rather closely too with Laidlaw’s suggestion that modes of religiosity can be “embedded” in one another. But such solutions raise further problems. Why would the modes neatly diverge in some cases but seemingly intermingle more closely in others? What factors drive oscillations between the two (an issue raised eloquently by Shankland)? Are there just two modes or multiple modes of religiosity (Bayly has proposed three<sup>1</sup>)? And what are we to do about patterns of religious activity that occur (often in a very stable form) in the absence of either doctrinal or imagistic dynamics (abundant examples supplied by Lewis)?

Expressed in such a condensed form, the problems raised in response to the modes theory might seem to be overwhelming. None of these problems spells doom, however. Recall that most, if not all, the contributors acknowledge that the bifurcation is “out there.” It is just that there is also a great deal more going on. The challenge is to update the modes theory so that it can capture more of the data, without (of course) foreclosing the possibility of falsification. Our starting point, I suggest, should be the fact that not all concepts are equally easy to produce and pass on.

### The Cognitive Optimum Position and the Theory of Modes of Religiosity

Some cultural concepts are naturally easier to generate and to acquire than others. Learning the tune of an advertising jingle, for instance, will always be easier than learning the melody of a piece of experimental jazz. And the skill of adding up small sums is bound to be more readily acquired than that of applying the principles of calculus. And so it is also in the domain of religion. God, the gray-



bearded father figure in the clouds, is bound to be more easily represented in one's mind than the notion of a disembodied, omnipresent God. These contrasts in the relative ease with which concepts of specified types can be produced, grasped, and remembered derive in large part from certain "built in" strengths and limitations of our species' cognitive architecture.

Certain systematic biases in the way we humans think persist despite all our efforts to transcend them. No matter how advanced one's knowledge becomes in the field of astronomy, for instance, one will always readily fall back on the intuitive idea of the sun moving across the sky (rather than the earth revolving around the sun) when unconsciously judging the time of day. The intuitive way of thinking, in other words, can never be eliminated but will always lurk somewhere in one's mental repertoire, ready to be called upon when the occasion allows. At the same time, however, the limitations of our cognitive apparatus *can* be progressively transformed as we undergo increasingly elaborate and advanced forms of training. The possible role of a newly discovered neurotransmitter in the onset of Parkinson's disease will be grasped and appreciated much more easily by a neuroscientist than by a musician. Both kinds of professionals have the same basic cognitive equipment, and share much the same repertoire of tacit assumptions about the world, but in certain domains of causal reasoning with regard to biological processes the neurologist has a massively richer set of mental frameworks, enabling him or her to acquire new concepts in that domain far more easily than the musician. In the domain of *religion*, experimental psychologist Justin Barrett has proposed that we refer to the expert frameworks and associated concepts as "Theologically Correct" (TC) discourse, whereas more intuitive kinds of religious thinking (such as anthropomorphic god concepts) constitute a rather more robust and ubiquitous default position. Barrett has assembled a compelling body of evidence that Christians, for instance, whether experts or novices in their particular tradition, readily slip into more intuitive ways of conceptualizing God, if the cognitive system is put under pressure. In particular, they will abandon their TC concepts of omnipresence and adopt a more humanlike notion of God, whenever the cognitive resources available for the task of reasoning about God's behavior have been sufficiently restricted (Barrett and Keil 1996; Barrett 1999). In what follows, I will refer to all aspects of religious thinking that migrate toward the intuitive end of the spectrum as *cognitively optimal*.

Cognitively optimal concepts are ones that the human mind is naturally well-equipped to process and remember, or that readily trigger exceptionally salient or attention-grabbing inferences, *in the absence of any special training or inducement to learn such concepts*. Even when people have mastered a body of difficult-to-acquire concepts (often at great cost in terms of time, energy, and training), they never outgrow their susceptibility to more natural ways of thinking. In that sense,

cognitively optimal mentation might be described as a kind of “default position.” Its representational content is “optimal” in the sense that it enjoys a selective advantage within human populations everywhere, all else being equal, but it is not optimal in the sense of being “truer” or more desirable, or even more adaptive, than other kinds of mental products. Concepts that human minds find easy to acquire are often false or unfalsifiable, and many have negative outcomes for the survival or well-being of the people who entertain them. Moreover, the mechanisms that cause such concepts to be easily acquired did not necessarily evolve because those concepts confer (or have ever conferred) selective advantages in biological terms. For instance, certain melodies are “catchy” because of natural human sensitivities to tonal variation. Those sensitivities probably evolved in concert with the development of language, their “proper domain” of activation; a predilection for music might very well have been a curious by-product of that, just one of the many “actual domains” for the application of our peculiarly human aural capacities (see Sperber 1996).

Cognitively optimal aspects of *religion* have received considerable attention in recent years, with the result that we now know rather a lot about the intuitive mechanisms underlying the production and acquisition of concepts of supernatural agency, ritual procedures, and mythical narratives. If we are to understand the implications of this work for the theory of modes of religiosity, and more specifically for the criticisms that have been leveled at it by some of the contributors to this volume, then we will first need to undertake a brief survey of the main findings in this area.

To begin with concepts of the supernatural, anthropomorphism is clearly part of what makes some concepts of gods, spirits, and ancestors “cognitively optimal.” According to anthropologist Stewart Guthrie, there is now overwhelming evidence that humans are naturally predisposed to pay attention to the presence of potential agents in their environments, even to the extent of investing inanimate objects with human qualities on the flimsiest of pretexts. The title of Guthrie’s book, *Faces in the Clouds* (1993), concisely makes the point. If the propensity to see humanlike presences helps to explain the ubiquity of supernatural beings in the world’s cultural traditions, then this is, however, only part of the story. It does not, for instance, explain adequately what is so “super” about supernatural agents. This is where Pascal Boyer’s work has made an especially important contribution (Boyer 2001).<sup>2</sup> Boyer has assembled compelling evidence that people everywhere are significantly more likely to pay attention to and to remember representations of “minimally counterintuitive” concepts than other kinds of concepts (all else being equal). By “minimally counterintuitive” Boyer means concepts that entail simple and limited violations of intuitive expectations. For instance, we intuitively expect unsupported objects to descend and for a collision of moving objects to

result in breakage or displacement. And yet we readily acquire concepts of ghosts, who are construed as violating these ordinary expectations. This is precisely what makes these concepts “catchy,” according to Boyer. Ghosts are minimally counterintuitive concepts in that they exhibit all the intuitive characteristics of ordinary people (e.g., intentionality and belief-desire psychology) and yet in one very simple detail they violate intuitive ontological assumptions (e.g., concerning gravity, solidity, etc.), being able to float about and pass through solid objects. Thus, *cognitively optimal* concepts of supernatural beings would be ones that are both *anthropomorphic* and *minimally counterintuitive*.

Another prominent feature of religious systems everywhere is ritualization, and this too has a number of cognitively optimal aspects. For a start, there are some compelling grounds to suppose that the urge to devise and certainly to participate in rituals is at least partly activated by mental structures that are also concerned with the avoidance of contaminants. The clinical condition of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) would appear to be the result of overactivation of innate contamination-avoidance mechanisms (Boyer 2002) and, as such, might provide particularly revealing clues as to the compelling nature of at least some socially sanctioned, institutional rituals among people who do not suffer from the condition. Fiske and Haslam (1997) show extraordinarily strong correlations between OCD symptoms and the forms taken by ritual obligations cross-culturally, suggesting that the same cognitive mechanisms underpin both. Rituals in which supernatural beings are assumed to play some sort of role are cognitively optimal in a series of other ways as well. Whereas ordinary actions might involve agents (the person acting), patients (the person being acted upon), and perhaps also instruments (any artifacts used in the action), religious rituals often postulate a link between one of these “slots” in a natural action schema and some kind of supernatural being (see Lawson and McCauley 1990 and McCauley and Lawson 2002). So we get rituals in which a deity can be associated with the agent slot (e.g., acting “through” the priest who carries out a wedding or an ordination), or the patient slot (e.g., where the deity is construed as the beneficiary of an offering or sacrifice), or the instrument slot (e.g., where ritual artifacts are construed as somehow sacred, as for instance in the holy water used in a Roman Catholic blessing). McCauley and Lawson have developed an impressively detailed account of how intuitive (and minimally counterintuitive) thinking, based on the above kinds of considerations, might determine our implicit expectations and evaluations of rituals. This too marks off a set of features common to most religious traditions that can be described as cognitively optimal.

Finally, rituals are cognitively optimal in a sense that has been discussed at some length by several of the contributors to this volume. That is, ritualization involves a minimal violation of intuitive expectations concerning the intentionality

undergirding action. As Bloch puts it (in chapter 4), rituals are special kinds of actions that “do not completely originate in the intentionality of the producer at the time of their performance” (p. 000). This argument, some key aspects of which were first identified by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994), is central to understanding the dynamics of both doctrinal and imagistic modes. Rituals are actions that have been stipulated in advance, rather than being spontaneous expressions of the ritual actors’ intentions at the moment of performance.

If there are aspects of our ideas about supernatural agency and ritualization that may be described as “cognitively optimal,” this is also true of the way certain religious *narratives* are put together, for instance as more or less sacred myths, legends, and histories.

We humans naturally spin yarns, and pass them on, partly because we are predisposed to represent all events in terms of simple causal stories. Cognitively optimal stories are found in all religions, and in all cultural traditions more generally. These are always stories with memorable plots and ones, moreover, that work well as parables (Turner 1996), insofar as they can provide source narratives for indefinitely many target narratives. To the extent that stories about primordial ancestors and creator beings, messiahs and prophets, and so on, are felt to provide relevant analogues and even justifications for the way things are done in the world around us, these religious narratives have great intuitive appeal and are likely to be widely recalled and transmitted.

In sum, we should have no difficulty building and passing on a religious tradition composed largely of *cognitively optimal* concepts (e.g., of saints, ancestors, gods, etc.), rituals (e.g., blessing and baptisms), and narratives (e.g., creation myths and wise sayings). Not only are such traditions hypothetically possible, they are actually very widespread.

*But*, and this is a big “but,” cognitively optimal religious traditions are also very commonly subverted by the dynamics specified by the theory of divergent modes of religiosity. These “modes dynamics” are capable of transforming simple concepts of deities and ghosts into far more conceptually complex ideas about (for instance) redemption and the Holy Trinity. In other words, modes of religiosity provide the mnemonic infrastructure required to build *maximally counterintuitive concepts*. And these more complex religious representations, having been acquired at considerable cost, also carry *motivational force* in a way that can supercede our natural inclinations. Moreover, their mode of formation and transmission has a host of consequences for social morphology, including the scale and structure of the religious tradition and levels of cohesion among its members. Religious traditions based around cognitively optimal concepts, rituals, and narratives are not capable of generating these forms of identity and social organization.

Modes of religiosity, then, are created against a background of more intuitive, cognitively optimal ways of thinking and behaving. It is tempting to say, perhaps,



that modes dynamics resolve problems that are prefigured in cognitively optimal practices. Consider, once again, Bloch's view of ritual (following Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) as a special kind of act in which normal grounds for attributing intentionality have been removed or at least altered. If rituals are not actions authored by those who perform them, then who stipulated these actions in the first place, and why? That is a question, which, according to Bloch, may elicit three kinds of response in both ritual participants and observers.

First, people could simply ignore the problem—pretend that the question of intentional meaning is an irrelevance. As Bloch also observes, however:

We are dealing with people with human minds, therefore with the mind of animals who are characterized by an intentionality seeking device which they, unless blocked with much effort, exercise ceaselessly, one might almost say obsessively, sometimes consciously but often unconsciously, and which enables them to read other minds and thus coordinate their behavior with that of others. (Bloch p. 000)

As such, Bloch considers the option of *ignoring* the intentional origins of ritual acts to be “unnatural” (p. 000) and difficult to maintain. It runs against our in-built inclinations, which are to hunt down intentional meanings in every action we observe. Second, people might address the question of ritual meaning when pressured to do so (for instance, on the urgings of an inquisitive ethnographer)—in which case the exegetical commentaries are constructed “on the hoof,” and with little consistency or conviction. Third, people might engage in a more prolonged search for “deep” and satisfying ritual exegesis:

In rare, but important, moments people are going to ask themselves, or others, why things are done in this way and they will not give up in spite of the apparent difficulties encountered. Their mind reading instinct will just not leave them alone. This kind of determination is what Whitehouse considers leads to “rich and revelatory religious experience.” (Bloch p. 000)

Bloch does not offer a detailed explanation for the presence of these three kinds of responses (nor of others, specified by the modes theory). Still less does he explain why some general circumstances trigger certain kinds of responses more readily than others (an issue that is, however, discussed at some length by Lewis). Bloch's arguments provide a very significant starting point, but they do not take us far enough.

According to the “modes theory,” the first of Bloch's options is often associated with conditions of extensive *routinization*. The search for intentional meaning in rituals is “switched off,” at least most of the time, when the actions become so familiar, so habituated, that they can be performed with little or no engagement

of explicit memory, merely on the basis of implicit procedural knowledge. To put it bluntly: when actions can be carried out without any need for conscious reflection about *how* to perform them, the urge to consider *why* we perform them (i.e., to ask questions about the intentional meanings of the actions) is somewhat diminished, at least at a population level. Bloch describes this state of affairs as “unnatural” and “difficult to maintain,” but it seems to me that it is rather commonplace and widespread. Fortunately, the topic is amenable to both ethnographic and experimental investigation.<sup>3</sup> What people genuinely find quite difficult, in these conditions, is to have to make up some kind of exegetical meaning spontaneously, on the spot (Bloch’s second option). Anthropologists have often found, to their puzzlement and consternation, that people are unwilling or unable to proffer ritual exegesis, even in the face of considerable badgering to do so. It can be hard to tease apart the “can’t” and the “won’t” in all of this. One may readily appreciate that people are inclined to redirect questions of ritual exegesis to their leaders and experts, on grounds of deference, etiquette, politeness, and so on. But this might also be because their own thoughts on the matter are comparatively sparse and superficial. There is another very important possibility, however, that Bloch does not consider here. It is that, in conditions of routinization, people are highly susceptible to learning very elaborate exegetical concepts, transmitted verbally. Although they may be disinclined to invent their own exegesis, they might be very adept at soaking up highly *repetitive* authoritative pronouncements on the subject of what their rituals mean. Bloch’s third option, the spontaneous production of elaborate, “revelatory” ritual exegesis, is most prominently associated with low-frequency, high-arousal rituals. Bloch may not agree with that claim, but he supplies no evidence to the contrary. In fact, both ethnographic and psychological data seem to me to support such a view rather strongly (see Whitehouse 2000).

According to the theory of modes of religiosity, revelations are not the outcome only of *spontaneous exegetical reflection*, as generated within the imagistic mode, they are also inherent in *verbally transmitted* religious teachings in conditions of ritual *routinization*. Heavy repetition of religious teachings can ensure the relevance of the orthodoxy for the interpretation of everyday experience, a point persuasively made by Brian Malley (p. 000):

The repetitious and the novel portions of a sermon . . . help people connect biblical teaching to their everyday lives. The repetitive portion does this by repriming fundamental doctrines in memory: the woman who comes in discouraged is uplifted as she is reminded of God’s concern for her; the man contemplating a child-care decision is reminded of his ultimate values. The novel portion of the sermon suggests new ways in which the Bible might be seen as speaking to daily life: Jesus’s dining with tax-gatherers illustrates how evangelicals are to reach out to the needy; Abraham’s willingness to obey God even at the cost of sacrificing his own son shows how



important faithfulness is. And so forth. In both its repetitive and its novel parts, the sermon is designed to help people live in the light of the word of God.

But when a particular aspect of everyday life is illuminated by the Bible or a sermon, it is not always clear to us that we are the authors of the analogy, any more than that the preacher of a sermon is the sole author of its apparently novel elements. On the contrary, the connections we make or that are made for us in a sermon seem to have been at least partly anticipated and mapped out in advance. Such impressions also derive from *routinization*, as follows.

When standardized teachings are heavily reiterated, well beyond the point of communicative redundancy, we can describe these kinds of utterances as *ritualized*. As such, they raise all the same problems of attributing intentionality that Bloch (chapter 4) and Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) associate with ritual in general. It is no longer clear who is speaking—is it the priest before us, or is it the countless priests whose words he is now recalling and passing on? The message clearly does not originate in the medium, but its exact origins remain mysterious. When the messages we have learned in this way are activated in our everyday activities and experiences, we cannot exactly *own* them as our thoughts, nor can we even say with confidence that the connections we make are our own inventions. An obvious (and thus a common) solution to that predicament is to attribute both the thoughts/teachings and their providential activation to a Higher Source. That is itself a kind of revelation, however commonplace.

One of the most prominent hallmarks of *both* routinized religious teachings in the doctrinal mode *and* the prolonged processes of spontaneous exegetical reflection in the imagistic mode, is that the resulting bodies of religious knowledge become extremely complex, and intrinsically hard to acquire. In the case of the doctrinal mode, learning the official teachings requires long-term training, through regular verbal transmission and through more private study and discussion with experienced members of the tradition. In the case of the imagistic mode, it generally requires a lifetime of personal reflection on matters of ritual exegesis and cosmology, accompanied by increasing responsibility for orchestrating the ritual performances themselves, to achieve the recognized position of religious “expert” (typically “elder”). Either way, we are dealing with concepts very different from those generated on the hoof in response to the badgering of ethnographers (i.e., the second of Bloch’s three varieties of ritual exegesis). Modes dynamics generate intrinsically complex, difficult-to-acquire concepts. These kinds of concepts, and the forms of social morphology with which they are associated, must be systematically distinguished from those parts of the cultural repertoire that comprise more intuitive, easily transmitted ideas and forms of behavior, and which I have here described as clustering around a “cognitive optimum position.”

With the above elaborations to the modes theory in place, we may be in a position to return to some of the problems and criticisms raised in this book. A major problem, of course, is empirical verification. The challenge, it seems to me, is to set out the precise conditions under which a set of ritual practices should: (a) activate doctrinal mode dynamics, (b) activate imagistic mode dynamics, (c) assume “cognitively optimal” forms, or (d) become extinct. Of crucial importance, obviously, is the exact specification of varying aspects of ritual transmission, such as frequency, arousal, codification, and so on. If all the relevant variables, and the predicted outcomes of their interaction, can be identified clearly, then we should be able to agree on what would count as confirming or disconfirming evidence, and thus to test the modes theory more systematically. Because of space limitations, I have tackled these issues in a separate book for this series (Whitehouse 2004: chapter 9), but the resulting refinements to my hypotheses owe much to the critical coaxing of contributors to the present volume.

Another major challenge, identified at the outset, was to specify more clearly the scope of the “modes theory.” What aspects of religion should the theory be capable of explaining, and what is beyond its remit? Thanks to the critical observations and evidence presented by the contributors to this volume (and also to Whitehouse and Martin 2004), it is clear that the modes theory can only hope to explain the transmission of certain kinds of rituals, beliefs, and patterns of social morphology. Much of what passes as religion, however, turns out to be beyond the explanatory ambition of the theory. For this reason, I have been obliged to extend the theory, to take into account what might be called the “cognitive optimum position.”

Gilbert Lewis’s ethnographically rich contribution focuses almost exclusively on cognitively optimal practices rather than on the kinds of activities, among the Gnaou and their neighbors, that are most clearly shaped by modes dynamics (e.g., the spectacular Tambin initiations and penis-bleeding rites, as well as the forms of religious experience and sociality stimulated by the spread of Christian traditions to the region). Focusing on the outputs of intuitive mechanisms (taboos, spittings, invocations, avoidances, etc.) was of course entirely legitimate. There is nothing to say that the latter mechanisms are more or less “interesting” or worthy of study than the modes dynamics that Lewis chose not to focus on (and justifiably so, since my earlier work had not adequately specified its scope of application). Nevertheless, while the presence of both kinds of cultural transmission can hardly be doubted, it does not (as Lewis might be taken to imply) necessarily cast doubt on the legitimacy of the doctrinal-imagistic dichotomy itself.

Some aspects of Shankland’s queries concerning the scope of the modes theory invite a similar response. Shankland observes that, very broadly speaking, Turkish Islam has come to be increasingly dominated by a doctrinal mode of operation, gradually dropping its imagistic-mode dynamics. Assuming some sort of



psychological “need” for a release from the excessive discipline of routinized worship, he suggests that Muslims in the region have turned increasingly to the joys of alcohol and popular music, in place of the less readily accessible euphoria promised by Sufi mysticism. But surely, Shankland muses, the “psychological roots” of both high-arousal ritual and highly drunken revelry are much the same. Moreover, they entail a common stock of activities (especially songs and dances). And, if both kinds of activity are “imagistic,” then why describe that as a mode of *religiosity*? As Shankland puts it: “Why should a ‘mode’ stop being so when it drifts from the religious sphere?” (Shankland, p. 000).

The answer, I would suggest, is that drunken parties are not intrinsic elements of any sets of modes dynamics. Not only would the core activities have to be *ritualized*, in the sense that Bloch uses that term, but in order to contribute to the formation of an imagistic mode of religiosity, these rituals would have to drive prolonged processes of “spontaneous exegetical reflection.” My understanding is that Sufi mysticism does precisely that. By contrast, there is no evidence (and no particular reason to suppose) that the consumption of alcohol and pop music in Turkey or anywhere else triggers the same psychological effects. As such, like the spittings and invocations of Lewis’s Gnau informants, the drunken singing and dancing that Shankland observed in Turkey is probably beyond the remit of my theory. It too belongs to that part of the cultural repertoire that hovers around the cognitive optimum position.

I think we are now also better placed to make sense of certain aspects of the European Reformation. Howe’s chapter seems to show that many of the practices of medieval Christianity were clustered around the cognitive optimum position, rather than either of our two modes of religiosity. For instance, following Bossy’s (1985) account of late medieval religiosity, Howe emphasizes the extent to which basic taxonomic categories of kinship provided the main organizing principles for popular ideas concerning rites of baptism and death, as well as Christian ideals of sociality more generally. The forms of intuitive cognition supporting this kind of cultural transmission have been analyzed in particular detail by anthropologist Roy D’Andrade (1995). But there are reasons to think that ritualized expressions of kinship relations were also shaped by a pervasive concern with the avoidance of contamination/pollution and the “cleansing of the body” (Howe p. 000). Howe makes much of the contrasts between these cognitively optimal ideas of the medieval laity, on the one hand, and the more complex, “theologically correct” concepts of both the monastic tradition *and* the Reformation. The latter were expressions of a bona fide doctrinal mode of religiosity, which—in contrast with the beliefs and practices of the laity—required substantial mnemonic support in order to be transmitted intact. For the medieval church, the problem was how to reconcile maximally counterintuitive “official” concepts (for instance, about the

fate of the soul), on the one hand, and more popular, intuitive notions couched in the idioms of kinship, on the other. In practice, Howe maintains, “the church found it had to accommodate itself to lay practice. It did this by having priests say masses for the dead so that the living could discharge their familial and charitable duties” (p. 000). By contrast, reformed thinking was less conciliatory and pursued instead the far more difficult (in fact, psychologically impossible) task of eliminating cognitively optimal versions of religious thinking from the Christian repertoire (Howe p. 000):

One of the most momentous things that Reformation theology taught, especially through Luther, was that almost all of the structure of Christianity, built upon kinship, community, charity, and obligations, had no scriptural authority. . . . There is, unsurprisingly, not much evidence that the ordinary masses in the early stages of the Reformation understood the complexities of the evangelical message.

If monastic and reformed Christianities at the end of the European middle ages were dominated by the doctrinal mode, and lay religious life was driven more by the mechanisms of intuitive cognition, then Howe shows rather strikingly that comparable divisions are discernible in the Hindu traditions of contemporary Bali. *Adat* Hinduism is premised on much the same intuitive concepts of kinship taxonomy and contamination avoidance (in this context, caste-based) as the thinking of lay Europeans in the late medieval period. A theologically correct version of *adat* Hinduism, known as *agama*, has emerged in Bali, however, and now occupies a position somewhat resembling that of the medieval church in Europe—itself dominated by the doctrinal mode and yet obliged to reconcile its teachings, at least to some extent, with the concepts of an untutored laity. More astonishingly still, Balinese religiosity currently has the corollary of a reformed church in the guise of devotional Hinduism—essentially a reaction against the *agama* orthodoxy, much as Protestantism emerged as a reaction against the dilution of the doctrinal mode in many parts of the medieval tradition in Europe. Thanks to Howe’s perceptive critique of my earlier discussion of modes dynamics in the sixteenth century, these comparative issues are capable of being framed and investigated much more profitably.

Is the notion of a “cognitively optimal position” really sufficient, though, to address all the doubts some contributors have expressed concerning the so-called mixed mode problem? We still have to explain the presence of low-frequency, high-arousal rituals in traditions that lack full-blown imagistic dynamics, and that often display all the core features of the doctrinal mode. We also have to deal with growing evidence that *routinized* practices elicit very different levels of emotional arousal and motivational force in different traditions at different times. These is-



sues might be most effectively addressed by shifting our focus onto patterns of historical transformation, an issue that has justly warranted considerable attention throughout the volume.

### Implications for the Sociopolitical Dynamics of Religion

Shankland's discussion of broad historical trajectories in the Muslim world, in light of Gellner's seminal work on that topic, is one of several attempts in this book to relate the modes theory to patterns of sociopolitical transformation. Peel examines such problems in relation to the missionization of West Africa, especially by Christian denominations. Højbjerg focuses on the history of modes dynamics in a single West African case. Goody also draws on West African material but focuses primarily on the changing politicoreligious climate of ancient Egypt. Malley meanwhile explores the role of doctrinal-mode dynamics in the historical development of fundamentalist Christianity in the United States. Additional trajectories are suggested by ethnographic examples from Asia, presented by Laidlaw, Bayly, and Howe. The material presented in these chapters has important implications for our understanding of the role of modes of religiosity in patterns of historical transformation.

In *Arguments and Icons* (Whitehouse 2000), I suggested that doctrinal and imagistic modes constitute major attractor positions around which religious traditions coalesce. I still think so but, as indicated above, I now think there is another attractor position, one that is even more ubiquitous and influential in cultural transmission, and that is the *cognitive optimum position*. This has important implications for the historical dynamics of religion.

In the case of the doctrinal mode, institutional stability is always the outcome of a complex compromise. If a doctrinal orthodoxy is to be preserved intact as a reasonably standardized body of meaningful and relevant teachings, then it must be subjected to a regime of heavy repetition. This is most obviously the case for the purposes of acquisition—people cannot learn a body of ideas with a heavy conceptual load unless these ideas are subject to frequent narrative rehearsal, review, and consolidation. But, as we also probably all agree, religious orthodoxies typically involve levels of repetition that are greatly in excess of the needs of learners and novices. Even after the knowledge has been quite thoroughly grasped and memorized, adherents undergo further reiterations of that knowledge (e.g., through daily or weekly sermons). When speech is *ritualized* in that way, it seems as if one's own thoughts and experiences are not entirely one's own. As Bloch and others have observed, one may come to imagine the haunting presence of Another Agent at work in all this, who is neither oneself, nor one's teacher, nor even the dimly conceived procession of teachers who have come before. That Agent at the

source of it all, the Originator of the message, becomes the category of the “sacred” as Durkheim struggled to conceive of it (see Bloch p. 000). Thus, “intelligibility” lies not merely in a grasp of the complex chains of analogy and inference entailed by the narratives and dogmas of the doctrinal mode, it resides also in the revelatory sensation that religious knowledge makes some *special* sense of the world. What is special about it is that it comes from within, and yet it doesn’t. It seems to be both internal/mental and also external/public. And in that paradox the sense that life is more than just individual experience (that a set of intentions—a plan—guides us as surely as we sometimes think that we guide ourselves) also becomes intelligible, at least to some degree.

But heavy repetition also carries risks. People can tire of hearing the same exhortations and parables. All routinized religions have ways of punishing expressions of boredom and of rewarding endurance in the face of its effects. One solution that seems to have been selected in a number of the religious traditions described in this volume is to raise levels of arousal and, in some cases, of spontaneous exegetical reflection, in the doctrinal mode. In effect, this amounts to “borrowing” some of the tried and tested techniques of the imagistic mode, but with a difference. In the case of high-arousal Jain rituals, described so vividly by Laidlaw, full-blown imagistic dynamics are prevented from taking hold because of the unrelenting emphasis on verbal rehearsal, which continues long after the ordeal has been surmounted and in spite of the fact that the ritual patients have a detailed understanding of what their ordeals will entail in advance of experiencing them. These factors might be expected to reduce the impact of episodic encoding and serve to suppress (to what extent, we don’t know) processes of independent exegetical reflection. But it seems that at least some of the cohesion effects typical of the imagistic mode are present, and these may have motivational implications. Similar things may be happening among the Sai Baba devotionalists described by Howe. The truth is, there is much to find out about these phenomena, but the data presented in this volume are sufficiently rich and detailed to lead us to ask some searching questions about my original formulation of the relationship between doctrinal and imagistic modes.

Arguably, it would lead to confusion to describe most high-arousal rituals in traditions dominated by the doctrinal mode as “imagistic,” at least where such practices do not generate the full complement of features that, by my definition, constitute the imagistic mode. Malley has argued that high-arousal religious experiences among evangelical Christians can have significant implications for levels of morale and commitment but, in most cases, these experiences are personal and solitary and therefore do not form the kinds of small ritual groupings we find in the imagistic mode. Nevertheless, they may have the effect of increasing the rate and volume of spontaneous rumination on matters of doctrine and exegesis. That



in turn would present problems for the standardization of orthodoxy and may help to explain the relatively egalitarian and uncentralized character of such traditions (on which Malley also comments). So what we seem to have is a tradition operating broadly in the doctrinal mode but that incorporates additional features (some of which are also found in the imagistic mode) that may have the effect of bolstering levels of motivation.

Of course, not all routinized traditions are as successful as these in rousing their followers. What happens when the “tedium effect” *does* become entrenched? One possibility is that the religious authorities back off somewhat. The mechanisms used for policing the orthodoxy might be partially dismantled, as both lay and professional adherents lose heart. Unauthorized innovations may go unpunished and continued self-discipline unrewarded. Even the frequency of participation in ritual may be reduced and some of the burdens of routinization lifted. In these general circumstances, the cognitive optimum position tends to exercise a special influence.

Whenever the mechanisms for transmitting complex religious knowledge start to falter, natural mechanisms of cognition are activated by default. Hard-to-acquire concepts are increasingly reformulated as simpler, more intuitive versions. Religious ideas become the stuff of popular culture, as illustrated by Shankland’s discussion of the “secularization” of certain Islamic traditions, now increasingly built around patterns of drinking and entertainment. In some populations, such a state of affairs is normalized. In others, it might trigger ambitious initiatives of reform, whereby it is felt that people should be reeducated and the “authentic” institutions reestablished. Of course, that might be more a matter of reinvention than restoration, but it is often a genuine return to the past in the sense of resurrecting the disciplines of the doctrinal mode. In much the same vein, one wonders if the iconoclastic and aniconic tendencies that Goody points to in certain periods of ancient Egyptian religiosity are really attempts to assert the dominance of doctrinal orthodoxy over cults founded on imagistic dynamics (an interpretation that might be inferred from certain parts of Goody’s argument). Or, alternatively, are we dealing with periodic attempts to eradicate the images and other intuitively accessible supports of popular culture, and to replace them with the more cognitively costly concepts of a heavily policed religious orthodoxy?

Cognitively optimal concepts may impact on modes dynamics in other ways. Christian Højbjerg examines a case, that of the West African Poro cult, in which the imagistic mode provides the principal psychological and sociopolitical dynamics. Revelatory knowledge in the imagistic mode, of course, does not take the form of a doctrinal orthodoxy that must be protected from distortion and decay, nor is it vulnerable to the tedium effect. But adherents to the Poro cult obviously have the same kinds of minds as followers of a doctrinal tradition and, as such,

share the same “default” intuitive assumptions about their social environments. A particularly salient assumption, Højbjerg shows, is that humanity may be divided into essentialized categories (see Hirschfeld 1996) that become the objects of coalitional thinking (see Boyer 2001). Although the doctrinal mode is capable of generating forms of political association that cut across these essentialized categories (e.g., a “brotherhood of man,” or similar imagined community), that is not a feature of imagistic-mode thinking. On the contrary, as Højbjerg persuasively demonstrates, all attempts to transfer the social cohesion of Poro ritual communities to wider coalitions are highly tenuous and short-lived. The cognitively/affectively salient groupings of the imagistic mode are by their nature small-scale and fiercely exclusivist. Intuitive notions of sameness and difference, on the basis of which wider coalitions may be formed, *unless* these acquire the motivational force of attachments to imagined communities established through doctrinal-mode rituals, will *always* be overruled by particularistic bonds in situations where high-arousal, low-frequency collective rituals are performed. The ritual ordeals entailed in Poro initiations, and the cohesive groupings they create, predictably provide a much more compelling and stable foundation for collective identity and cooperation than the ever-changing regional coalitions envisaged by some observers (see Højbjerg: chapter 10).

## Conclusion

Close scrutiny of a wide range of ethnographic materials in this volume has revealed that much religious thinking is an expression of natural cognition rather than of the special kinds of mnemonic and social organizational mechanisms provided by modes dynamics. Thus, drawing on a range of recent findings in the cognitive sciences, I have postulated a *cognitive optimum effect*, comprising concepts that are relatively easy to acquire and pass on, because of their intuitive (or minimally counterintuitive) properties. Most cultural concepts display those qualities and this, of course, is why people all over the world can “read” each other’s intentions and cooperate successfully (at least some of the time), regardless of cultural “barriers.” In a sense, most cultural differences are trivial. The overt *content* of rules and principles of politeness, decency, morality, humor, allegiance, exchange, production, consumption, love, and war certainly differ in the details, but they are generated by a common stock of underlying, largely tacit, mechanisms. As such, new “content” is far easier to learn than would be the case if the underlying mechanisms themselves differed from one population to the next. At the time of the “big debate” between rationalists and relativists (Wilson 1970), comparatively little was known about the psychic unity of our species. That situation has been changing fast, thanks to a veritable explosion of scientific research on the evolu-



tion and phylogenetic development of cognition (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992). Most of culture requires *only* the activation of ubiquitous, “natural” mechanisms to get off the ground. That is not the case, however, in certain domains of “expert” cultural knowledge such as science, religion, and at least some forms of art (and art criticism). Although requiring natural cognition, these specialist domains also require massive investments of pedagogic labor if they are to be transmitted because the concepts they uphold and value are intrinsically difficult for the human mind to process. The mother of these expert domains is religion, and the arts and sciences her (largely ungrateful) offspring.<sup>4</sup> But, however advanced our expert knowledge becomes, our natural default is the cognitive optimum. At times, especially for specific practical purposes, modern astronomers will still imagine that the sun rises and travels across the sky, a child’s painting will still look a bit like a Picasso, and God will still be some old bloke in the sky. No matter how fancy our theories and aesthetics become, there will always be “easier” versions of our knowledge that we fall back on as the need arises, and that threaten to spread more widely than the respectable, authoritative account.

The theory of modes of religiosity, however, is concerned with exploring how rather more variable, conceptually complex religious concepts come into being and seeks to identify at least some of the major consequences of this for the formation and transformation of religious coalitions. Despite the many constructively critical observations of contributors to this volume, those aspects of the theory of modes of religiosity that are capable of being tested by ethnographic evidence would appear to remain more or less intact. Of course, the ethnographic record is vast in scope and depth and our incursions have inevitably been localized. But this volume has had other aims as well. We have tried, for instance, to establish a more precise set of hypotheses to be tested by future research. And we have also sought to develop new critical insights into the theoretical traditions in which we work as anthropologists.

At the same time, these chapters offer important corrections to certain features of the modes theory, resulting in a number of refinements to its original predictions. Competing theoretical perspectives have also been presented, but it seems to me that this exercise has done more to promote productive syntheses rather than to create intractable divisions among alternative approaches. This extends also to the ways in which we have all looked back to much older traditions of scholarship, particularly the works of Durkheim and Weber, and the twentieth-century modernist theories they have inspired. What we select, and what we discard, must always be determined by the most basic and pragmatic of scientific principles: economy, empirical productivity, and falsifiability. Such simple principles make all the difference between “paradigms” and “agendas,” between knowledge and fashion, and between regeneration and decay. At least we can say that we

have an increasingly detailed set of plans and some reliable foundations on which to build.

## Notes

1. There is a risk here, however, of falling into the trap of thinking that one element in the nexus of doctrinal or imagistic modes is sufficient to characterize a “mode of religiosity.” In suggesting that a certain kind of reflexive discourse on modes of religiosity, on the part of religious adherents themselves, constitutes, in and of itself, a “third mode of religiosity,” I think Bayly and I may be at cross purposes on matters of terminology. True, doctrinal revelations are verbalized and imagistic ones are not (or not to any great extent), but while these are necessary features, they are not sufficient to characterize a “mode.” Modes, in the sense I’ve intended at least, are composed of entire suites of mutually reinforcing features. If, following Bayly, we were to characterize modes of religiosity as “modes of experience” or “modes of talking about religion,” then I suspect we would end up not with three but with scores (indeed, potentially hundreds) of modes of religiosity.

2. Moreover, Boyer’s corpus of research in this area has received some interesting embellishment in a recent book by Scott Atran (2002).

3. Bekah Richert is currently working on a series of experimental studies in Northern Ireland, designed to test the extent to which frequency of repetition influences the nature, rate, and volume of exegetical thinking with regard to ritual procedures. This follows a series of pilot studies on the topic, reported in Whitehouse 2004.

4. For a discussion of the historical emergence of these domains and the differences between religion and the arts/sciences, see Whitehouse 2004; see also McCauley 2000.

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