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Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts

Edited by

Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg



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TRANSMISSION*

Harvey Whitehouse

Like any other cultural phenomena, ritual actions and the meanings with which people invest them are *distributed* across populations. To ask how and why these distributions come into being is to ask for an account of the mechanisms of *transmission*. At one time, at least in some parts of the academy, the dominant framework for understanding cultural transmission was *diffusionism*. According to diffusionists, the distribution of cultural traits (including rituals) resulted from histories of contact between populations. In explaining similarities in the ritual practices of contemporary populations, perhaps separated by immense distances and natural barriers, diffusionists sought to unveil *either* common origins *or* ancient paths of culture-contact that might account for indirect transmission of shared traits.¹ A major limitation of some versions of this approach, however, was their lack of any detailed account of the mechanisms of transmission. Moreover, the emphasis of diffusionism was on the spread of material culture rather than of procedural and semantic knowledge, with which the present discussion is primarily concerned.

Diffusionist approaches were, in any case, soon eclipsed, at least in Britain, by the rise of functionalism. A key doctrine of the latter was that resemblances among cultural phenomena in diverse populations were superficial and misleading.² Rituals, for instance, that looked the same might in fact play very different roles in the social lives of the different populations currently sustaining them. A focus on the functional integration of social institutions in local settings

* This article was completed during a period of sabbatical leave funded by the British Academy in the form of a two-year Research Readership.

¹ See, e.g., F. Graebner, *Methode der Ethnologie* (Heidelberg, 1911); W. Schmidt, *The Culture Historical Method of Ethnology*, trans. S.A. Sieber (New York, 1939); E.G. Smith, *The Diffusion of Culture* (London, 1933); W.H.R. Rivers, *Social Organization* (London, 1924); and A.C. Haddon, *The Wanderings of Peoples* (Cambridge, 1911).

² See B. Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and other Essays* (Chapel Hill, 1944).

rendered the study of historical and inter-cultural transmission largely irrelevant. A prominent heir to this way of thinking in social and cultural anthropology has been the postmodern preoccupation with 'local appropriations' of what seem (again, it is alleged, only superficially) to be diffused traits, such as those associated with 'globalization'. It would seem that a concern with qualitative research in small populations, regardless of the analytical perspectives supporting it, encourages the impression that the mechanisms driving cultural transmission are distinctive to the local group under study *rather* than being more widely generalizable. At least two recent, cross-disciplinary initiatives in the study of cultural transmission now challenge that trend: the emerging science of memetics and the cognitive science of culture. The latter, as we shall see, is now making an especially rich and detailed contribution to our understanding of the transmission of *rituals* and of *ritual meanings*.

Memetics, although currently encompassing a wide range of perspectives,³ rests on some shared premises with regard to a fundamental comparability of distributions of biological and cultural traits respectively, and the selectional mechanisms of transmission that govern both kinds of processes. But like earlier diffusionists, very few (if any) memeticists have yet presented a detailed account of the cognitive dynamics that might bias transmission in specifiable ways.⁴ Largely for this reason, memetics has had little to say about how mechanisms of transmission might differ within and across specified *domains* of culture—for instance, how religious transmission might differ from the transmission of scientific concepts and, even more important for present purposes, how ritual transmission might differ from the transmission of non-ritual knowledge. This is where cognitive approaches come into their own.

The cognitive approach to cultural transmission proceeds from the assumption that specifiable features of the way human minds acquire skills and information serve systematically to bias transmission of such knowledge and hence can help to explain which kinds of traits in

³ See R. Aunger (ed.), *Darwinizing Culture. The Status of Memetics as a Science* (Oxford, 2000).

⁴ See D. Sperber, "An Objection to the Memetic Approach to Culture", Aunger (ed.), *Darwinizing Culture*, 163–173; P. Boyer, "Cultural Inheritance Tracks and Cognitive Predispositions. The Example of Religious Concepts", H. Whitehouse (ed.), *The Debated Mind. Evolutionary Psychology versus Ethnography* (Oxford, 2001), 57–89.

human populations are capable of achieving cultural levels of distribution. There are currently two main strands to this work, which are ultimately compatible. First, there are cognitive approaches to transmission which are concerned with the impact of universal intuitive (or minimally counterintuitive) mechanisms of thought on the selection of cultural representations. This work was initially pioneered by Dan Sperber,⁵ E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley,⁶ and Pascal Boyer,⁷ but has subsequently given rise to a minor industry of further research that both supports and embellishes the original paradigm.⁸ Second, there are cognitive approaches to transmission that emphasize the consequences of variable activation of memory systems and other mechanisms of *explicit* mental processing under specifiable conditions of transmissive frequency, emotional arousal, and prior learning. The latter approaches stem largely from my own work,⁹ which is in turn built on eclectic foundations.¹⁰ Research in this area now involves the inputs of a wide range of scholars in the

⁵ D. Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 11; Cambridge, 1975); D. Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology. Towards and Epidemiology of Representations", *Man* n.s. 20 (1985), 73–89; D. Sperber, *Explaining Culture. A Naturalistic Approach* (London, 1996).

⁶ Lawson and McCauley 1990.

⁷ P. Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication. A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 68; Cambridge, 1990); P. Boyer, "Explaining Religious Ideas. Outline of a Cognitive Approach", *Numen* 39 (1992), 27–57; P. Boyer, *Cognitive Aspects of Religious Symbolism* (Cambridge, 1993); P. Boyer, "Cognitive Constraints on Cultural Representations. Natural Ontologies and Religious Ideas", L.A. Hirschfeld and S.A. Gelman (eds), *Mapping the Mind. Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge, 1994), 39–67; P. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas. A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1994); P. Boyer, *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York, 2001); P. Boyer, "Review of Arguments and Icons. Divergent Modes of Religiosity (H. Whitehouse, Oxford, 2000)", *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16 (2002), 8–13.

⁸ See J.L. Barrett, "Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2000), 29–34; I. Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works. Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion* (Cognition and Culture Book Series 1; Leiden, 2001); S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust. The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Evolution and Cognition; New York, 2002); J. Slone, *Theological Incorrectness. Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford, New York, 2004).

⁹ E.g., H. Whitehouse, "Memorable Religions. Transmission, Codification, and Change in Divergent Melanesian Contexts", *Man* n.s. 27 (1992), 777–797; H. Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult. Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology; Oxford, 1995); H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons. Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford, 2000); H. Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity. A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, 2004).

¹⁰ See Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult*, chap. 8.

fields of anthropology, archaeology, historiography, and cognitive science, and is leading to increasingly precise and testable hypotheses.¹¹ Both of these current strands in the cognitive science of culture have resulted in detailed accounts of ritual transmission which have important consequences for each other. And both assume that at least part of the challenge in explaining the transmission of rituals is to identify how these units of action are remembered and what motivates people to pass them on.¹² Let us begin with the activation of universal *implicit* mechanisms of cognition.

We now have a wealth of evidence that much of human behavior presupposes the activation of mechanisms that are normally inaccessible to conscious inspection—in other words, that operate at an *implicit* level.¹³ Some of these implicit mechanisms, such as the embodied skills required to drive a car, are manifested as culturally specific

¹¹ For reviews of Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons* see esp. the following contributions to *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16 (2002): F. Barth, 14–17; P. Boyer, 8–13; B. Malley, 5–7; L.H. Martin, “Rituals, Modes, Memory, and Historiography. The Cognitive Promise of Harvey Whitehouse”, 30–33; H. Whitehouse, “Conjectures, Refutations, and Verification. Towards a Testable Theory of Modes of Religiosity”, 44–59; as well as McCauley and Lawson 2002; H. Whitehouse and L.H. Martin (eds), *Theorizing the Past. Historical and Archaeological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek, 2004); H. Whitehouse and J. Laidlaw (eds), *Ritual and Memory. A New Comparative Anthropology of Religion* (Walnut Creek, 2004).

¹² Note that the claim here is *not* that memory and motivation are the *only* aspects of cognitive processing that need to be taken into account in the transmission of explicit cultural knowledge—for instance, I have elsewhere emphasized the role of analogical reasoning in religious reflexivity, which involves the creation of novel source-target pairings as well as acts of recall (H. Whitehouse, “Religious Reflexivity and Transmissive Frequency”, *Social Anthropology* 10 (2002), 91–103), and of course many other candidate mechanisms might be involved, including certain features of extended cognition. A prime example of the latter is the use of technologies of inscription, although some pioneering work on that topic (e.g., J. Goody, “Introduction”, J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), 1–26; J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture, and the State; Cambridge, 1986); J. Goody, “Is Image to Doctrine as Speech to Writing? Modes of Communication and the Origins of Religion”, Whitehouse and Laidlaw (eds), *Ritual and Memory*, chap. 3) may have tended to overestimate the impact of literacy on cultural transmission (see Whitehouse, “Memorable Religions”; Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons*; Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*). But for any of these other mechanisms to have widely distributed and lasting effects on people’s thoughts and actions, systems of memory and motivation are necessarily implicated. Factors influencing the operation of these systems must therefore occupy a central position in any attempt to explain cultural transmission.

¹³ For a lively discussion of that evidence, see R.S. Steele and J.G. Morawski, “Implicit Cognition and the Social Unconscious”, *Theory and Psychology* 12 (2002), 37–54.

competencies. Others, such as the inference that animate beings are driven by invisible intentional states, are more or less invariable the world over. Ritual transmission obviously involves both kinds of implicit thinking. When a Polynesian commoner adjusts his posture in the presence of a chief or an Indian Brahmin observes certain taboos surrounding food preparation, these people are exhibiting culturally specific skills of a largely unconscious, procedural nature but are also responding to environmental cues in ways that presuppose the presence of complex evolved cognitive architecture activated in much the same way in *all* human populations. One quite well-supported hypothesis is that at least some aspects of ritualization are expressions of evolved neural equipment dedicated to detecting and avoiding hazardous contaminants in the environment. Just as we have an adaptive susceptibility to the acquisition of elaborate rules and prohibitions dealing with blood, corpses, excrement, and so on, so we seem to be prone to learning and applying seemingly arbitrary rules *in general*. Fiske and Haslam argue, more specifically, that there is a recurrent tendency in human societies for such rules to emphasize themes of cleanliness, neatness, pollution anxiety, and boundary maintenance.¹⁴ Although finding extreme expression in the pathological condition known as 'obsessive compulsive disorder', much the same repertoire of concerns is manifested in many (if not all) of the world's ritual traditions.¹⁵

The idea that rituals activate evolved contamination-avoidance mechanisms might help to explain why ritual scripts are so compelling and easily spread. But, at best, this could only be part of the explanation for the successful transmission of rituals. On the one hand, not all rituals activate concerns about pollution, at least not to the same degree, and any sense of compulsion to repeat the actions in question would also seem to be variable (and in many cases ritual participation seems to require institutional sanctions or incentives). On the other hand, it is obvious that rituals activate a wide range of *other* implicit mechanisms of cognition besides those concerned with the avoidance of contamination. An especially rich and

¹⁴ Fiske and Haslam 1997.

¹⁵ See Fiske and Haslam 1997, 216–220; see also Boyer, *Religion Explained*; Boyer, "Review of *Arguments and Icons*".

detailed body of work, focusing on such mechanisms, has been initiated by Lawson and McCauley.¹⁶

They are concerned with types of implicit cognition entailed specifically in 'religious rituals', by which they mean those forms of ritual action which presuppose the involvement of a supernatural agent (or agents). Variations in the way such agents are implicated in the *formal* aspects of religious rituals have wide-ranging consequences for our intuitive expectations regarding the efficacy, repeatability, and reversibility of various kinds of ritualized actions, and even affect our implicit judgments of what might constitute appropriate levels of sensory stimulation occasioned by participation in the rites. A fuller account of these arguments is set out in this volume by Lawson.¹⁷ The models and evidence advanced by Lawson and McCauley suggest that the cross-cultural recurrence of particular categories of rituals (for instance, blessings, sacrifices, rites of passage) is a result of much more varied and complex cognitive causes than simply the natural inclination to defer to procedural prescriptions per se. What humans *also* find particularly compelling is the idea that supernatural agents are implicated in certain stereotyped actions through their associations with the subjects, objects, or instruments of these actions.

Although rituals may conform in various ways to implicit intuitive expectations, there are also aspects of ritualization that would seem rather directly to *challenge* certain of these expectations. Insofar as ritualization entails prior stipulation of the procedures to be carried out, ritual actions are not the spontaneous expressions of actors' intentions. According to Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, rituals are actions that lack "intrinsic intentional meaning".¹⁸ In a recent embellishment of that path-breaking argument, Maurice Bloch has argued that rituals violate expectations delivered by implicit "theory of mind" mechanisms.¹⁹ The latter drive humans to draw inferences

¹⁶ Lawson and McCauley 1990.

¹⁷ See Lawson in this volume. See also McCauley and Lawson 2002, who build their argument substantially around a critique of some of my earlier work. For a detailed reply, see Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*, chap. 8.

¹⁸ Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; see also Humphrey and Laidlaw in this volume.

¹⁹ M. Bloch, "Ritual and Deference", H. Whitehouse and J. Laidlaw (eds), *The New Comparative Ethnography of Religion. Anthropological Debates on Modes of Religiosity* (Lanham, 2004), chap. 4.

about the intentional meanings lurking behind *all* actions. In the case of ritual actions, however, the search for intentional meaning is inevitably frustrated because the actions in question do not originate in the intentions of the ritual actor. If there is an intentional agent behind it all, then who is it? And why did he or she insist on these particular procedures rather than any other? This is the point at which explicit processes of exegetical thinking can come into play. My own research focuses primarily on the different ways in which conscious reasoning about the meanings of rituals is elaborated and on the consequences of this for ritual transmission more generally.

In contrast with those features of ritualization discussed above that are somewhat automatically activated, regardless of the conditions of transmission, the development of more complex bodies of ritual exegesis depends on varying levels of transmissive frequency and arousal. Extensive surveys of ethnographic and historiographic sources suggest increasingly that rituals associated with complex exegesis (as distinct from the simpler, more implicitly intuitive kinds of ritual traditions alluded to above) tend to be clustered around contrasting attractor positions, associated with low-frequency, high-arousal rituals and relatively low-arousal, high-frequency rituals respectively.²⁰ Over the course of the last century, a great deal of scholarship has wrestled with the causes and ramifications of this bifurcation. Think, for instance, of Max Weber's distinction between "routinized" and "charismatic" religiosity,²¹ Ruth Benedict's distinction between "Appolonian" and "Dionysian" traditions,²² Ernest Gellner's "pendulum-swing theory of Islam",²³ and of course many other well-known examples could be cited.²⁴ As Scott Atran has observed,²⁵ it is very difficult to find clear examples of low-frequency rituals that evince low arousal, unless

²⁰ In particular, a wide range of evidence recently presented at British Academy Networks conferences at the Universities of Cambridge and Vermont is now available in print (Whitehouse and Laidlaw (eds), *Ritual and Memory*, Whitehouse and Martin (eds), *Theorizing the Past*).

²¹ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (London, 1930).

²² R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (London, 1935).

²³ E. Gellner, "A Pendulum-Swing Theory of Islam", R. Robertson (ed.), *Sociology of Religion. Selected Readings* (Harmondsworth, 1969), 127-138.

²⁴ For a fuller discussion, see Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult*, chap. 8; J. Peel, "Modes of Religiosity and Dichotomous Theories of Religion", Whitehouse and Laidlaw (eds), *Ritual and Memory*, chap. 2.

²⁵ Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 158.

these are constructed from a collage of more frequently-performed rites.²⁶ And there is similarly strong evidence that all ritual traditions associated with conceptually complex, verbally-transmitted exegesis are heavily *routinized*. A major challenge for the cognitive science of religion is to explain *why*.

Some of the solutions to these puzzles seem to lie in the strengths and limitations of human memory. Rituals that are highly arousing, personally consequential, and rarely performed are remembered as distinctive episodes in one's life experience. Activation of vivid episodic memories of this kind is, in general, liable to set off a search for deeper significances and portentous qualities in the episodes themselves.²⁷ But this is especially true when these memories relate to *ritual episodes*. Rituals are potentially puzzling forms of behavior at the best of times. Not only are the intentional states that gave rise to them difficult to infer from the actions themselves, as noted above, but rituals are also irreducible to a set of technical motivations.²⁸ Indeed, they seem to be characterized by a plethora of "aesthetic frills",²⁹ which could potentially mean anything (or nothing). Such mysteries are unlikely to elicit much of a response from most people, most of the time, unless some rather special conditions are present. Vivid episodic memory for ritual episodes would seem to provide one such special set of conditions. In reflecting consciously on their memories for low-frequency, high-arousal rites (such as initiations, climatic millenarian ceremonies, ritual homicide), people seem unable to resist the urge to speculate on the 'hidden' or 'deeper' meanings of their experiences of participation, resulting over time in the elaboration of highly personalized interpretive frameworks. Such knowledge takes a very long time to generate, via processes of spontaneous exegetical reflection, and so it is typically seen as the province of ritual experts and elders. But there is also another way in which exegetical knowledge can be created and transmitted, and this involves contrastingly high-frequency and *relatively* low-arousal patterns of ritual activity.

²⁶ See also McCauley and Lawson 2002.

²⁷ E.g., see D.B. Pillemer, E.D. Rinehart, and S.H. White, "Memories of Life Transitions. The First Year in College", *Human Learning* 5 (1986), 109–123.

²⁸ Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*.

²⁹ E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma. A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London, 1954).

As a general rule, levels of arousal *and* the rate and volume of spontaneous exegetical reflection correlate inversely with frequency of ritual performance.³⁰ The more routinized a ritual tradition becomes, the less surprising and emotionally stimulating its procedures will typically be, primarily because of familiarization. This is not to say that high-frequency rituals are necessarily emotionless (on the contrary, ritual repetition can be profoundly satisfying and pleasurable—or indeed highly irritating and unpleasant!) but only that the extremely high levels of arousal and shock that may be elicited in low-frequency rites are more problematic to sustain in a routinized regime. At the same time, the processing of ritual actions as embodied habits in procedural-implicit memory has the effect of reducing the need for explicit processing of ritual scripts and consequently has the effect of inhibiting explicit rumination on the meanings of these things. Nevertheless, routinization presents optimal conditions for the verbal transmission of ritual exegesis, often of an elaborate and complex nature. People can learn and recall standardized information of this sort if it is subject to regular rehearsal and consolidation. This is the main reason why all religious orthodoxies are also relatively routinized traditions.

These divergent trajectories with regard to frequency, arousal, and exegetical thinking also have consequences for other aspects of ritual transmission. In the case of low-frequency, high-arousal rituals, these tend to produce intense cohesion within small communities of participants, but are difficult to spread to wider populations. Part of the reason for this is that cohesion is established only among those who experience the rituals together—and who are capable of recalling this fact with reference to overlapping episodic memories. Since the rituals are rarely performed (and, for instance in the case of initiations, might be experienced once only in the patient role) there are few opportunities for extending the ritual community thereby established. If the ritual spreads, this is likely to occur via contact contagion at the level of groups, which is a relatively costly and inefficient method of cultural dissemination. Rituals can and do spread by this method,³¹ but as they travel the details of the rituals and

³⁰ The phrase 'as a general rule' carries considerable weight in this theoretical approach—we are dealing with culturally and historically distributed tendencies rather than invariable laws or mechanistic principles.

³¹ For detailed examples, see Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons*.

certainly the traditions of exegetical knowledge they sustain are prone to *mutation*. This has to do with the fact that the rituals in question are seldom subjected to centralized regulation and the small-scale ritual groupings they instantiate tend to favor the elaboration of distinctive markers of identity consistent with their locally-based cohesion. I have dubbed this complex of interlocking features the “imagistic mode of religiosity”.³²

In the case of high-frequency, low-arousal rituals, the rapid spread of standardized versions of both othopraxy and orthodoxy, and thus the homogenization of a regional tradition, is much easier to bring about. Since participants in routinized regimes are at once susceptible to the learning of verbally-transmitted exegesis and doctrine and yet relatively immune to the appeals of spontaneous exegetical reflection, the stage is set for the emergence of an authoritative canon. Reliance on verbal transmission of teachings places the corpus of religious knowledge in the hands of more talented orators (messiahs, prophets, evangelists, missionaries, etc.) who are able to carry the message over great distances to larger populations. This is a vastly more efficient method of transmission than group-level contact contagion. As orators rise above their fellows in virtue of their skills and are able to establish their own ideological outputs as authoritative, the potential for standardization of their teachings and practices may come to be backed up by centralized and hierarchical systems for monitoring and policing the tradition. I have dubbed this complex of similarly interlocking features the “doctrinal mode of religiosity”.³³

It is clear that the transmission of rituals in both of the above scenarios (that is, imagistic and doctrinal) involves the construction of traditions of explicitly religious knowledge that is highly motivating. In the imagistic mode, such knowledge tends to be restricted to the more experienced members of the ritual community—those who have ruminated on the hidden meanings of major rituals over years of private contemplation. Such persons tend to be viewed as the guardians of esoteric mysteries. Less experienced members of the ritual community may aspire to such a level of understanding but can

³² Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult*; Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons*; Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*.

³³ Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult*; Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons*; Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*.

only get there by undergoing a parallel mystical journey of their own, rather than through assimilation by word of mouth.³⁴ But, having been learned, this knowledge amounts to a body of profoundly valued revelations, felt to be superior in every way to the supposedly 'superficial' understandings of ordinary laymen (or non-initiates), and it carries great motivational force. For rather different reasons, the explicit teachings of a doctrinal orthodoxy are also highly motivating insofar as they too are upheld as 'higher' truths, marked with the stamp of collective authority and the legitimation of (often largely imagined) history. There are not all that many domains of human thought and behavior in which explicit forms of knowledge exercise such a great influence as this. Modes of religiosity, unlike other regimes for the creation and transmission of ideas, produce explicit knowledge of a highly compelling sort.

Nevertheless, the implicit mechanisms supporting ritual transmission, discussed earlier, are never far away. Although religious authorities in the doctrinal mode may insist on rather difficult-to-grasp patterns of ritual action and exegesis, for instance, there will always be a tendency for people to construe these imperatives in ways that accord more closely with their intuitive ideas about ritual form or supernatural agency. Thus, there is always a delicate tension between the demands of 'theologically correct' discourse and more easily processed versions.³⁵ In the case of low-frequency rituals, any serious reduction in levels of arousal could result in a collapse of imagistic dynamics, the loss of major bodies of revelatory knowledge, and the establishment instead of simpler patterns of ritual transmission that derive their appeal from implicit cognition. The doctrinal mode is especially vulnerable to such patterns of degeneration. If the orthodoxy is policed too heavily and the demands of routinization and discipline taken to extremes, this is liable to provoke demoralization and perhaps even to stoke rebellion as followers become susceptible to more enlivening forms of religious experience. If, on the other hand, the duties of religious authorities are taken too lightly, and the orthodoxy is not subjected to an adequate level of rehearsal and

³⁴ See F. Barth, "The Guru and the Conjurer. Transactions in Knowledge and the Shaping of Culture in Southeast Asia and Melanesia", *Man* n.s. 25 (1990), 640-653.

³⁵ See J.L. Barrett, "Theological Correctness. Cognitive Constraint and the Study of Religion", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11 (1999), 325-339.

reiteration, then this can lead to a reformulation of the complex doctrinal system in the direction of more intuitive versions, thus opening the way for projects of renewal and reformation. Such are the broad patterns of historical transformation in all the 'great religions'. Partly for this reason, modes dynamics 'on the ground' tend to wax and wane in intensity and we may observe a continually shifting balance in the dominance of imagistic and doctrinal modes in particular traditions across space and time, including patterns of oscillation between them, as described at length in my work on Melanesian religions.³⁶

The above arguments might be readily expressed within an epidemiological framework, of the kind originally proposed by Sperber.³⁷ The transmission of rituals is a process driven and regulated by selectional mechanisms rooted in cognitive operations and their conditions of activation. On the one hand, humans are prone to acquiring and passing on rituals that minimally conform to the implicit biases and expectations of evolved cognitive architecture (activated by default in all societies). People are seldom able to tell us in any detail *why* such rituals are important to reproduce—and, even if they were, such statements would be of limited value because the cognitive functions that *really* motivate participation largely operate outside of conscious awareness. On the other hand, there are also types of ritual activity that generate a great deal of elaborate exegetical knowledge that genuinely contributes to people's motivations to carry out (and perhaps to spread) the rituals in the future. The mysterious, often esoteric knowledge of ritual experts operating the imagistic mode compels them to orchestrate repeat performances within relatively elongated cycles of transmission. And, in rather different ways, the verbally (and often scripturally) standardized explicit knowledge of religious authorities in the doctrinal mode drives people's participation in more routinized regimes of ritual action. These last two strategies for ritual transmission result in contrasting patterns of spread: the one localized or regionally fragmentary (imagistic mode), and the other expansionary and homogenizing (doctrinal mode). Often we find that both modalities of transmission are activated within a single religious tradition, as distinct domains of operation, and both are

³⁶ Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult*; Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons*.

³⁷ Sperber, "Anthropology and Psychology".

susceptible to distortions motivated by implicit cognitive mechanisms activated by default. These dynamics are central to historical patterns of reproduction and transformation in all ritual traditions. They are proposed as cardinal points for any general theory of ritual transmission.