

HARVEY WHITEHOUSE, *Modes of Religiosity. A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* — Walnut Creek, CA a.o.: Alta Mira Press 2004 (193 p.) ISBN 0759106150 (paperback). €23.50.

The Theory of the two divergent *Modes of Religiosity* provided by the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse belongs to the wider field of the emergent Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) recently introduced in an article by Jesper Sorensen.¹

The agenda of the CSR is to analyse and explain the origin, development and transmission of religious ideas on universal cognitive constraints. Culture and religion are the result of evolutionary processes of cognitive mechanisms, “that drive the selection of culturally widespread representations.” (7) Religion, therefore, is not a *sui generis* phenomenon, but an evolutionary product of human brainfunctions. Underlying universal cognitive processes and mechanisms are responsible for some similar religious phenomena, “whereas the emergence of a specific phenomenon at a particular time and place depends on other, contextual factors.”² This approach opens new possibilities to create specific scientific classifications, grounded in explanatory theories. The theory provided by Whitehouse is based on these assumptions.

In his theory, Whitehouse distinguishes between two forms of religious practice which he puts into interrelation with two divergent forms of longterm memory. The basics for his theory are preceded in two for-

¹ See Jesper Sorensen, “Religion in Mind: A Review Article of the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Numen* 52 (2005) 465–494.

² Sorensen (2005), 469.

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mer monographs.³ The structure of the book contains three main chapters, whereas in the first part “Cognition and Religious Transmission” the concept of counterintuitive representations is presented. With reference to the theory of counterintuitivity, provided by Pascal Boyer,⁴ the author distinguishes between “Cognitively Optimal” and “Cognitively Costly Religions.” The former concept is based on the “naturalness” of religious ideas as introduced by Boyer, which are characterized by the irritation of intuitive or ontological categories (of perception). Beliefs with this kind of counterintuitive qualities activate more attention than others and therefore are memorized easier. The latter concept of “Cognitively Costly Religion”, on the contrary, shows that there are some forms of religious ideas “that are hard to understand and demand enormous cognitive resources to manage and transmit.” (51) More complex ideas about counterintuitive agency need higher cognitive effort and also ritual, material, and labor expenses to be transmitted. With this kind of differentiation the author separates folk-religious concepts like ghosts or the belief in Santa Claus from more expendable concepts like complex god-genealogies or difficult ritual procedures. “The latter concepts require costly support in terms of both memory and motivation.” (55) Even though these theoretical assumptions remain controversial in their epistemological foundations, especially concerning the *explanandum* of the “naturalness of religious ideas,” the innovative concept of counterintuitivity and attractivity of religious representations provide fruitful theoretical considerations for future research within the science of religion.

The second main chapter “The Theory of Modes of Religiosity” provides the core idea and most inventive part of the book. Here the author operates with two divergent memory systems. The sociopolitical morphology of religious practice, thus, depends on two forms of memory functions which are responsible for the transmission of religious ideas in two divergent *doctrinal* and *imagistic* modes. The concept of semantic and episodic memory goes back to the famous psychologist Endel

³ Harvey Whitehouse, *Inside The Cult: Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea*, Oxford, a.o. 1995. Whitehouse. *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity*, Oxford, a.o. 2000.

⁴ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York, NY: Basic Books 2001.

Tulving.⁵ The author now argues that these two divergent memory systems highly affect the transmission of religious ideas. The semantic memory refers to more common and everyday knowledge like a lexical memory. The episodic or autobiographical memory, on the other hand, works with more personal experiences which are memorized as specific episodes.

The doctrinal mode is constituted by the activation of the semantic memory when religious ideas are repeated frequently. It is characterized by widespread, inclusive, standardized, centralized, and unpersonal forms of religious practice. In the imagistic mode, on the contrary, it is the episodic memory that is activated by high emotional arousal. Only rare, emotionally “dramatic” experiences remain as specific episodes in the autobiographical memory. High emotional arousal takes place in climactic rituals and becomes a reference point for individual “spontaneous exegetical reflections” (SER)(72,113) which are interpreted as revelations or personal inspirations. The associated meanings in climactic rituals are rarely shared by the community, whereas this kind of experience more likely promotes the recollection of the participants of the ritual. The imagistic mode is characterized by smaller groups, exclusive, ideologically heterogeneous, uncentralized, and personal forms of religious practice. These two forms of transmission can be found in every religious tradition and its twelve specific variables have wider consequences for the sociopolitical morphology of religious traditions. “What the theory of modes of religiosity sets out to explain, then, is the *tendency* for religious systems to gravitate toward divergent attractor positions.” (76)

In spite of some theoretical and empirical challenges to the theory, the differentiation between semantically based and experienced based forms of transmission and adoption of religious knowledge seem to point towards another very interesting aspect: the role of embodiment and incorporation. These aspects are not explicitly discussed in the theory, but offer space for further research. In reference to Sorensen, the emergence of religious phenomena do not only depend on cognitive conditions, but also on some contextual factors. As the psychologists Hans J. Markowitsch

⁵ See E. Tulving, “Episodic and Semantic Memory,” in *Organization of Memory*, Tulving, E. und W. Donaldson (eds.), New York, NY: Academic Press 1972.

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and Harald Welzer pointed out, the development of the autobiographical memory is influenced by biological as well as social factors.⁶ The human brain and its memory functions organizes and develops its phylogenetic and ontogenetic structures in relation to its physical and social environment.⁷ The development of the memory cannot be isolated from the development of other cognitive functions as well as motor-sensory acquirements.⁸ Body movement and body knowledge, therefore, can be seen as a bridge that connects social reality and cognitive functions. The anthropologist John Blacking underlines “shared somatic states”⁹ which synchronize emotions, body, and mental representations of a social community. These considerations could be put into account for further research about the relation between social reality and cognitive mechanisms and the role of embodiment within the theory of the modes of religiosity.

In his last main chapter, “Theoretical and Empirical Challenges”, the author emphasizes the need to test the theory according to different empirical cases. With this congenial statement the author shows that he is not placing the theory above the empirical realm. The author conflates psychological and sociopolitical factors and, through this, opens new insights to their interdependencies. This dichotomous model has some analogies to some previous theories about religion like those from Max Weber, Ernest Gellner, Victor Turner, or Fredrik Barth. However, according to Whitehouse, all these attempts lack of a real explanation about the origins of these contrasting forms of religious practice. (64) The outstanding explanatory claim of this cognitive approach offers a promising interdisciplinary theory for future research and tries not to refrain from “hard” theorizing. Much empirical and theoretical evidence for this theory has already been made,¹⁰ but more is still needed in order to provide a wider view on the

⁶ Hans J. Markowitsch and Harald Welzer, *Das autobiographische Gedächtnis*, Stuttgart: 2005, 21.

⁷ Markowitsch/Welzer 2005, 22.

⁸ Markowitsch/Welzer 2005, 63.

⁹ John Blacking, “Towards an Anthropology of the Body,” in *The Anthropology of the Body*, Blacking, John (ed.). London, New York, San Francisco: 1977, 10.

¹⁰ See Whitehouse/Laidlaw (eds.), *Ritual and Memory*, Oxford: Academic Press 2004; Whitehouse/McCauley (eds.), *Mind and Religion*, Oxford: Alta Mira Press, Walnut Creek a.o. 2005.

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interrelations between cognitive mechanisms, the individual body, and social reality.

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