SYNCHRONIZED RITUAL BEHAVIOR:
RELIGION, COGNITION AND THE DYNAMICS OF EMBODIMENT

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Our bodies, and our felt experiences of our bodies in action, finally take center stage in the empirical study of perception, cognition, and language and in cognitive science’s theoretical accounts of human behavior.¹

Synchronic behavior seems to happen naturally wherever individuals gather in groups and start to interact with their bodies. Bodily synchronization can be found in all kinds of social behavior, such as the vibrant movements of a school of fish, the energetic formations of a flock of birds, in a crowd at a music concert, or at a charismatic ritual performance. Its coordinating effects on the body underlie such diverse actions as the marching of soldiers, the dancing of a couple, the applause of an audience, the singing of a choir, or the collective muttering of prayers.

In this chapter I will, first, argue for the significant role of synchronic behavior in forming religious rituals, and explore the underlying cognitive and embodied mechanisms that drive such synchronizing processes in bodily interactions. Secondly, while critically reflecting on the scientific study of religion, cognition, and the body, I will emphasize that current cognitive and evolutionary theories of religion have focused too much on the brain in order to explain religious thought. Thereby they have neglected the body and its effects on both cognitive processes and embodied religious behavior. Thirdly, I will introduce an alternative approach from a lesser known field in cognitive science called embodied cognition that has not received much attention in the study of religion yet and that challenges the traditional mind-body dualism. Finally, I will elaborate on the embodied cognition model by sketching out a so-called body-schema of synchronized ritual behavior that can serve as an integrative model in the study of religion and the body.

The thesis of this chapter is that the shift toward neurobiological explanations of religion in religious studies has led to the situation that embodied practices and experience are largely ignored. Modern neuroscience by and large favors concepts of a naturalized body over aspects of human embodiment that can highlight the interdependent relations between the brain, the body, and the social world. From this perspective, the concept of embodied synchronization can help us to negotiate between a too naturalized perspective on the body and religion on the one hand, and a vague phenomenology of embodiment on the other hand that lacks neurobiological insights. I therefore start from the assumption that it is the embodiment of ritual practice, emotions, movement, dynamic bodily interactions, and social representations that shape the way we perceive the world and act in it. It is the bodily implication on human culture and its role in everyday social interaction that deserves new attention, particularly for a critical debate on modern neuroscience.

Embodied Synchronization as Integrative Model for the Scientific Study of Religion and Ritual

Human cultures and societies are in large parts coordinated and structured by synchronizing rituals such as annual celebrations, rites of passage, daily mealtimes, high holy days and holidays, and other everyday rituals. In addition, human beings are the only living species which is able to synchronously move to rhythmic music. Sociologist Robert Bellah, for instance, pointed out: “This ability to ‘keep together in time’ is probably one of several biological developments that have evolved synchronously with the development of culture, but one of great importance for the ritual roots of society.” This kind of synchronous behavior was recognized as a core social mechanism already a hundred years ago by the famous sociologist of religion Émile Durkheim, whose notion of “collective effervescence” pinpoints these emerging effects in highly emotional religious

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