GNOSTIC RITUALS FROM A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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1. Studying Early Christian Rituals

The analysis of early Christian rituals faces two major challenges. The first has to do with the theoretical basis of such an analysis and the second with the evidence to be analyzed or explained.

Scholars of early Christianity have generally approached their subject from theological or intellectualist perspectives, preferring belief to action, thought-world to social world, or myth to ritual. This is not to say that scholars have not been interested in the history of Christian liturgical texts and practices. Scholars of liturgy have typically traced the evolution of eucharistic and baptismal texts philologically, comparing ancient church orders and other liturgical traditions and trying to identify their most original forms as well as their background in Jewish ritual practices (Bradshaw 2002). The German history-of-religion school was fascinated by the influence of Hellenistic mysteries on early Christian myth and ritual (e.g., Reitzenstein 1927). More recently, especially New Testament scholars have begun to utilize sociological and anthropological models and perspectives in the study of early Christian texts. This has entailed some attempts to apply ritual theories developed in social or cultural anthropology, the most popular of which has been Victor Turner’s analysis of the dialectics of structure and anti-structure in the ritual process (V. Turner 1969, 1974; for applications to early Christian data, see, e.g., Draper 2000; McVann 1991, 1994; Strecker 1999).

Nevertheless, in terms of theory, there is not a large body of scholarly literature on early Christianity utilizing the study of ritual in anthropology and comparative religion on which one could build a cross-disciplinary approach to studying early Christian rituals. The little that has been done in this regard is not always illuminating with regard to the actual ritual activities among the earliest Christians and the role these rituals played in the transmission of early Christian traditions. It seems justified to conclude that the study of early Christian rituals is still in its embryonic state and any attempts to develop theoretical
approaches to them are consequently experimental. This essay is even
doingly experimental since it seeks to test the applicability of a recent
cognitive model, advanced by the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse,
on early Christian evidence. Cognitive approaches are themselves quite
a novelty in the study of early Christianity and differ in many significant
ways from more traditional approaches to ritual.

Although myth has often been preferred to ritual in the study of
religion, or myth and ritual have been conjoined so that the latter
has not been discussed without the former, recent approaches have
emphasized that ritual should be studied in itself and for itself (Smith
1987: 103; Bell 1992: 16). This orientation creates a further problem
for the study of early Christian ritual. If we want to study ritual in
its own right, we immediately face the fact that the evidence we have
for the ritual practices of the formative Christian groups, especially its
first two hundred years or so, is at its best sparse and fragmentary. Of
course, some theological interpretations of the rituals have remained
and also a few passages that are more or less confidently identified as
liturgical fragments. We also have some early church orders, such as the
Didache (first or second century), Apostolic Tradition (early third century),
and Didascalia Apostolorum (third century). These texts do not, however,
yield a comprehensive picture of the ritual practices and the relationship
between liturgical legislations (that is, church orders) and actual customs
is far from being straightforward (Bradshaw 2002: 18–19). We do not
have anything comparable to the ethnographic data based on fieldwork
observations and interviews undertaken by anthropologists. No “thick
description” of early Christian ritual systems is possible. This problem,
of course, exists in the investigation of all ancient religions.

The latter challenge is further intensified if one focuses on what are
usually called “gnostic” groups or movements among early Christians.
The scholarly construct of “Gnosticism” is currently a subject of lively
discussion (Williams 1996; King 2003; Marjanen 2005), but even without
that, we are faced with huge problems in defining the evidence. We
know even less of the community life of gnostic groups than of many
other branches of Christianity which were not condemned as heretics
by the church fathers. The knowledge we have often comes from the
polemical writings of the early Christian heresiologists and should not
be taken as disinterested observations or even as firsthand pieces of
information, although parts of their accounts are obviously based on
reading the books written by the heretics and even on personal contacts