TO PERFORM, OR NOT TO PERFORM?
A THEORY OF RITUAL PERFORMANCE VERSUS
COGNITIVE THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS TRANSMISSION

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1. Cognitive Theories of Religious Transmission: Some General Criticisms

One of the more exciting recent developments in the study of religion has been the discovery of the relevance of cognitive science to religion. Anthropologists, psychologists, and even some historians of religion have applied the theories and findings of cognitive science to explain such important religious phenomena as the belief in supernatural beings and the regularity of certain forms of religious ritual. Although cognitive theories of religion have significant implications for our understanding of such widespread aspects of traditional religion, and have become increasingly sophisticated and powerful, the awareness of these theories within religious studies remains confined to a small (but growing) circle of scholars. The present essay attempts to widen that circle, out of a conviction that both cognitive approaches to religion and more traditional historical and humanistic approaches would be enriched by cross-fertilization.

In the further conviction that the highest form of appreciation is critique, the present essay presents some criticisms of cognitive theories of religious transmission. My argument is that what we might call a “theory of ritual performance,” attuned to the rhetorical dimensions of ritual, offers a better account of some of the phenomena addressed by these cognitive theories. Cognitive theories claim that certain cross-cultural regularities in the form of rituals contribute to the memorability and transmission of such rituals and of the traditions they embody. A

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2 One index of this is that the recently published second edition of the Encyclopedia of Religion still does not include an entry on cognitive theories of religion.
theory of ritual performance both reinforces and challenges this claim. Some of the same ritual forms that contribute to memorability and transmission also contribute to the way that ritual produces persuasion. Specifically, the repetitiveness of ritual, in which cognitive theorists have seen only a mnemonic function, is in many cases better explained as contributing to a heightening of the “message” of ritual, or to making ritual more persuasive. Moreover, a brief analysis of some historical shifts in modes of religious transmission—including the Reformation, which serves as a touchstone for certain cognitive theories—reinforces the importance of ritual performance. One of the factors associated with the decline of certain forms of ritual repetition during the Reformation was Protestant polemics that targeted the rhetorical function of such devices. A theory of ritual performance frequently provides a better account of some aspects of the structure and the history of ritual than do current cognitive theories. In the future, cognitive theories of religious transmission should incorporate a recognition of ritual performance and its interaction with transmission.

Let me begin on a note of agreement. The anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse, who has proposed an important cognitive theory of religious transmission, has defined the necessary assumption of any cognitive theory of culture: “Culture in general—and religion in particular—are far from being infinitely plastic. There are material constraints on what people think and do, and some of the most significant of these constraints derive from the regularities of human cognition” (Whitehouse 2004a: 26). This is an assumption with which we should agree without hesitation. Buttressed by experimental data that suggests some of the actual “constraints on what people think and do,” cognitive theorists of religion have developed this assumption in order to account for the prevalence of certain religious beliefs and practices across different cultures and historical periods. For example, Pascal Boyer (2004) and Justin Barrett (2004) have focused on the widespread belief in supernatural beings, and have found that such “counterintuitive” properties as the ability to read minds may make these putative entities more memorable. Other cognitive theorists have focused on religious practices. Whitehouse (2000, 2004a) proposes a fundamental distinction between two “modes of religiosity” or types of religious transmission, the “imagistic” and the “doctrinal.” The imagistic mode, although it may involve the use of visual images, is characterized principally by its association with images, or with one-off, terrifying or otherwise impressive ritual events, such as rites of initiation. The doctrinal mode is characterized by its dependence on the elaboration of a systematic body of doctrine.