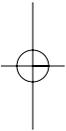
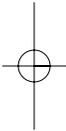
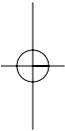
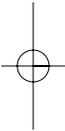
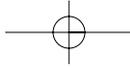
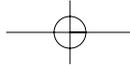


THE THEORY OF MODES OF RELIGIOSITY

II





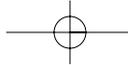


The Theory of Modes of Religiosity

4



IT HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNIZED that religion encompasses two very different sets of dynamics: Max Weber (1930, 1947) distinguished routinized and charismatic religious forms; Ruth Benedict (1935) contrasted Apollonian and Dionysian practices; Ernest Gellner (1969) explored the opposition between literate forms of Islam in urban centers and the image-based, cohesive practices of rural tribesmen; Jack Goody (1968, 1986) developed a more general dichotomy between literate and nonliterate religions; Victor Turner (1974) distinguished fertility rituals and political rituals as part of an exposition of the contrasting features of what he called “communitas” and “structure”; I. M. Lewis (1971) juxtaposed central cults and peripheral cults; Richard Werbner (1977) contrasted regional cults and “cults of the little community”; Fredrik Barth (1990) distinguished “guru” regimes spread by religious leaders, and “conjurer” regimes in which religious revelations inhere in collective ritual experiences. These are just a few of the many attempts to characterize a fundamental divergence in modalities of religious experience and practice (Whitehouse 1995, chapter 8; Peel 2004; Laidlaw 2004). At the root of all such dichotomous models is a recognition that some religious practices are very intense emotionally: they may be rarely performed and highly stimulating (e.g., involving altered states of consciousness or terrible ordeals and tortures); they tend to trigger a lasting sense of revelation and to produce powerful bonds between small groups of ritual participants. By contrast, certain other forms of religious activity tend to be much less stimulating: they may be highly repetitive or “routinized,” conducted in a relatively calm and sober atmosphere; such practices are often accompanied by the transmission of complex theology and doctrine, and also tend to mark out large religious communities composed of people who cannot possibly all know each other (certainly

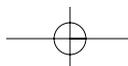
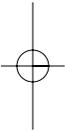
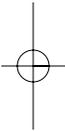


not in any intimate way). But all the great scholarship so far devoted to understanding these contrasting sets of dynamics suffers from two major shortcomings. The first is that none of the theories advanced in the past was sufficiently comprehensive; each theory focused on just a few aspects of the two modes of religious experience and action. The second major shortcoming is that none of the existing theories explained adequately why we get two contrasting forms of religious experience in the first place.

This chapter introduces the theory of divergent modes of religiosity, which I term “doctrinal” and “imagistic” (Whitehouse 1995, 2000a). The aim of the modes of religiosity theory is to tie together all the features of the two modalities of religious experience that other scholars have already identified and to explain why these contrasting modalities come about in the first place. This theory advances a set of hypotheses amenable to empirical investigation, concerning the causal interconnections between a set of cognitive and sociopolitical features.

Modes of Religiosity and Memory

In order for particular religions and rituals to take the form that they do, at least two things must take place. First, these religious beliefs and rituals must take a form that people can *remember*. Second, people must be *motivated* to pass on these beliefs and rituals. If people cannot remember what to believe or how to do a ritual, these beliefs and rituals cannot be passed down from one generation to the next, and so the religious tradition would not be able to establish itself. Equally, if people do not think that particular beliefs and rituals are important enough to pass on, the beliefs will mutate or become extinct. That being said, memory and motivation have the potential to present far bigger problems than one might suppose. Some religious activities are performed very rarely. Unless some very special conditions apply, there is a real risk that people will forget the details of what these activities mean and even forget how to perform them correctly. A potential solution to this problem is to have a very repetitive regime of religious transmission. One advantage of such a strategy is that a substantial corpus of complex cosmology can be reproduced in this fashion. People can learn difficult concepts, dogmas, and stories—and will remember these in the long run—if they repeat them frequently. But this can produce problems of motivation. Continually listening to sermons and performing the same rituals over and over might become extremely boring. And if people are bored, there is a danger they won’t continue to follow, or pass on, the religion. There are solutions to all these potential problems, and these solutions have profound consequences for the forms that religion can take. But before we can go into that, we need to grasp the general nature of memory functions (see figure 4.1).



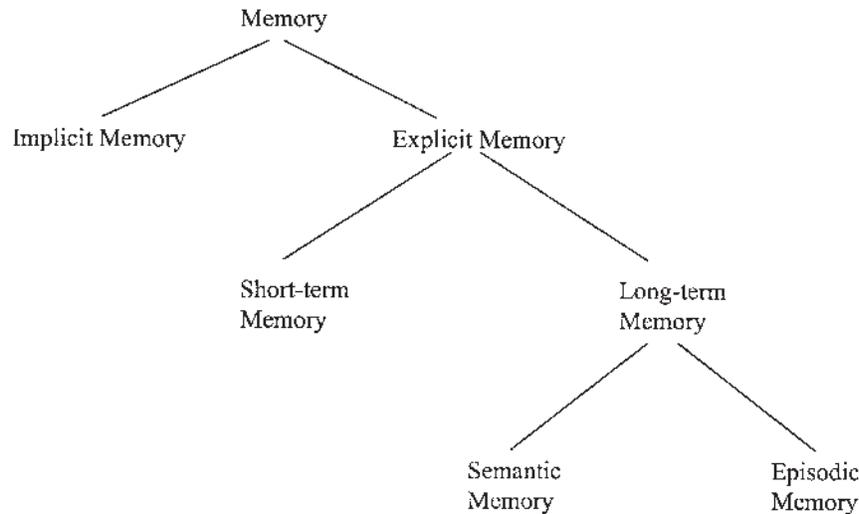


Figure 4.1. Types of Memory

There are basically two kinds of memory—implicit and explicit (Graf and Schacter 1985). Implicit memory deals with things we know without being aware of knowing (such as the varied forms of procedural competence required in successfully riding a bicycle).¹ Explicit memory deals with things we know at a conscious level, and can be further subdivided into two types—short-term and long-term.² Short-term memory enables us to hold onto concepts for a matter of seconds (e.g., a new phone number, which we might remember just long enough to write down before forgetting). Long-term memory enables us to hold onto concepts for hours—and in some cases for a whole lifetime. Long-term memory can also be subdivided into two types—semantic and episodic.³ Semantic memory consists of general knowledge about the world (e.g., how to behave in restaurants, or what is the capital city of France, etc.). We can seldom recall how or when we acquired this sort of knowledge. By contrast, episodic memory consists of specific events in our life experience (e.g., our first kiss, the death of a beloved relative, the day war broke out, etc.). These types of memory are activated somewhat differently in doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity.⁴ And these differences go a long way to explaining the divergent sociopolitical features of the two modes.

The Doctrinal Mode of Religiosity

In the case of the doctrinal mode of religiosity, ritual action tends to be highly routinized, facilitating the storage of elaborate and conceptually complex religious teachings in semantic memory, but also activating implicit memory in the performance of

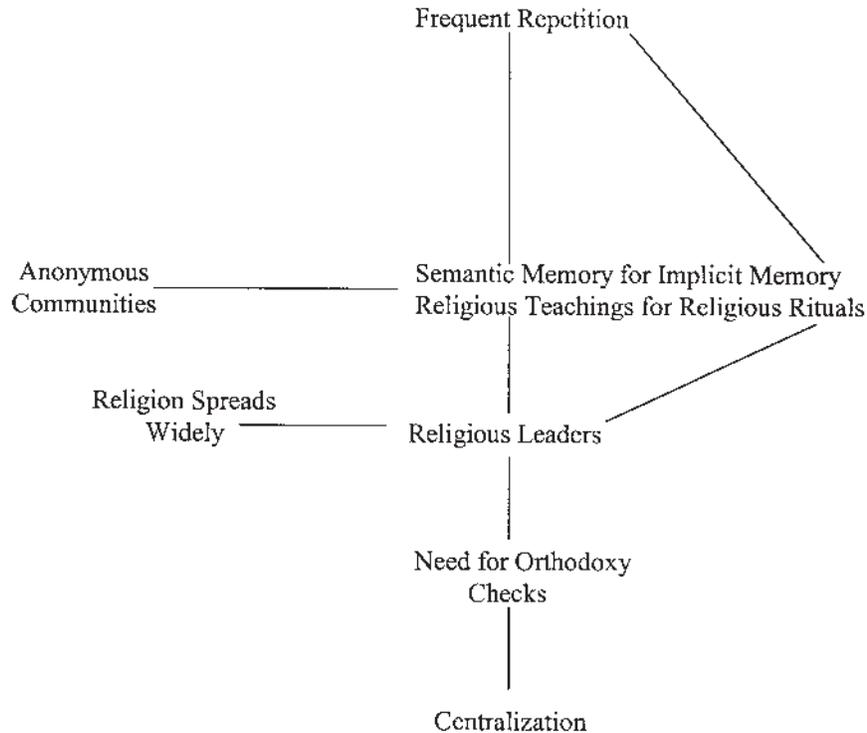


Figure 4.2. The Doctrinal Mode of Religiosity

most ritual procedures. These cognitive features are linked to particular social morphology, including hierarchical, centralized institutional arrangements, expansionary potential, and dynamic leadership. The specific hypotheses enumerated below are summarized in figure 4.2.

I. Frequent repetition activates semantic memory for religious teachings.

One of the most conspicuous features of the doctrinal mode is that the transmission of religious teachings is highly routinized (i.e., frequently repeated). A great advantage of frequent repetition is that it allows the establishment of a great deal of explicit verbal knowledge in semantic memory. Doctrines and narratives that would be impossible to learn and remember if they were rarely transmitted can be effectively sustained through repetitive sermonizing. Repetition, however, can lead to reduced levels of motivation. In detailed empirical studies of this phenomenon, I have labelled this the "tedium effect."⁵ But many routinized religions are successful at holding onto their followers through a variety of mechanisms, including supernatural sanctions (such as eternal damnation) and, more

positively, incentives (such as eternal life and salvation). Of course, the power of these mechanisms depends on people believing the religious teachings. In order for people to believe in a set of doctrines, the doctrines have to be cast in a highly persuasive fashion. This is commonly achieved, at least in part, by special techniques of oratory established over time through processes of selection. Routinized religions tend to be associated with highly developed forms of rhetoric and logically integrated theology, founded on absolute presuppositions that cannot be falsified.⁶ All of this is commonly illustrated by poignant narratives that can easily be related to personal experience.⁷ Additionally, the heavy repetition of explicit beliefs increases their accessibility and relevance in everyday settings.⁸

2. Semantic memory for religious teachings and the presence of religious leaders are mutually reinforcing features.

Where religious ideas are expressed in words (e.g., transmitted through oratory), it is likely that the orators themselves will rise above the common herd. Most religious traditions of this sort have celebrated leaders who may take the form of gurus, messiahs, prophets, divine kings, high priests, mediums, visionaries, disciples, or simply great evangelists or missionaries. The very fact that there are so many different types of, and terms for, religious leadership is an index of how widespread and important the phenomenon is. Partly through their skills as orators, these leaders become marked out as special. But, at the same time, their pronouncements (real or attributed) provide the central tenets of a belief system, and their deeds become the basis for widely recounted religious narratives, transmitted orally. Both forms of knowledge are stored primarily in semantic memory.

3. The presence of religious leaders implies a need for orthodoxy checks.

Where religious leaders are upheld as the source of authoritative religious knowledge, their teachings must be seen to be preserved intact. At the very least, the credibility of any such tradition depends on its adherents *agreeing* what the teachings are, even if other traditions hold to alternative (and perhaps conflicting) versions. We might call this the principle of agreement. Agreement depends partly on effective detection of unauthorized innovation, and then on its effective obstruction and suppression. Religious routinization contributes to both detection and suppression by conferring a selective advantage on standardized/orthodox forms over nonorthodox ones. The link between routinization and detection is especially straightforward. Frequent repetition of a body of religious teachings has the effect of fixing it firmly in people's minds. In literate traditions, the teachings might also be written down in sacred texts, and thereby fixed on paper (at least to some extent). But the crucial

thing is that standardized versions of the religious teachings become widely shared and accepted through regular public rehearsal and reiteration.⁹ Once this has happened, the risks of innovation going undetected become remote. Rather more complex is the role of routinization in the obstruction of unauthorized innovation, to which we now turn in points four and five.

4. Frequent repetition leads to implicit memory for religious rituals.

So far, we have considered only the effects of frequent repetition of religious teachings; but what about the effects of routinized ritual performances? Rituals that are performed daily or weekly rapidly come to be processed, to a considerable extent, in procedural/implicit memory.¹⁰ There can be little doubt that at least some Christians, for instance, spend significant portions of church services simply going through the motions. This is not a slur on people's religious commitments. It is simply a psychological reality that repetitive actions lead to implicit behavioral habits that occur independently of conscious thought or control. Although potentially accessible to conscious representation (e.g., for the purposes of teaching a child or newcomer how to behave in church), liturgical rituals may not, in the normal pattern of life, trigger very much explicit knowledge at all.

5. Implicit memory for religious rituals enhances the survival potential of authoritative teachings stored in semantic memory.

To the extent that people do participate in routinized rituals "on autopilot," this reduces the chances that they will reflect on the meaning of what they are doing. In other words, frequent repetition diminishes the extent to which people come up with personal theories of their rituals.¹¹ And they are more likely to accept at face value any official versions of the religious significance of their rituals. The processing of routinized rituals as implicit procedural schemas really opens the way for religious authorities to tell worshippers what to believe, especially when it comes to the meanings of their rituals. At the same time, the provision of a standardized orthodoxy tends to limit individual speculation. The causal role of routinization in the suppression of unauthorized innovation is, here again, governed by principles of selection. It is not that frequent enactment of rituals *prohibits* exegetical innovation, but it tends to reduce the volume and elaborateness of exegetical reflection, leading to relatively low rates of unauthorized innovation across populations of religious adherents. The question "relative to what?" will be answered later in this chapter through an examination of processes of exegetical reflection and independent innovation in the imagistic mode.

6. The need for orthodoxy checks encourages religious centralization.

Not all innovation is a bad thing. The principle of agreement simply requires that innovation is seen to originate from authoritative sources and is accepted or observed by all loyal followers. Routinization may have the effect of insulating orthodoxies to some extent from unintended innovation, but it does little to obstruct the determined heretic. The problem here is clearly one of policing. As soon as a routinized religion becomes well established, we tend to see the emergence of a central authority and some sort of ranked, professional priesthood.¹² It becomes the task of delegated officials to police the orthodoxy across the tradition as a whole, and there will often be a proliferation of sanctions for unauthorized innovation and heresy (ranging from excommunication and ostracism to torture and execution).

7. Semantic memory for religious teachings leads to anonymous religious communities.

Where religious beliefs and practices are frequently repeated, we have seen that at least part of this religious knowledge is organized in semantic memory. This means that the knowledge itself becomes separate from particular episodes in which it is acquired. For instance, a Christian may believe certain things (e.g., about the significance of the crucifixion) and may do certain things (such as participating in weekly church services), but that is not the same as remembering how and when all this knowledge was acquired. In other words, many of the beliefs and acts that define a person's identity as a Christian are not remembered as special episodes.¹³ In consequence, many aspects of what makes somebody a Christian are really abstracted properties that, in principle, could be ascribed to anybody. And, in fact, they do get ascribed to anonymous others. To understand why, it is useful to think about the issues in a concrete way. If you ask a regular church-going Christian to tell you what happened at a service or mass three years ago, he or she wouldn't be able to remember the actual event. That person could tell you, though, what happened, because it would have been the same thing that always happens. In other words, what makes a particular episode distinctive gets forgotten. This of course includes the makeup of the congregation: people in the congregation come and go, people die, they move in and out of the area, and there may be visitors who come and go. If it is a big congregation, there may be many people there who do not know each other personally. Thus, one's memories for Christian rituals are not memories for a particular group of people. What it means to be a regular churchgoer is not to be part of a particular group, but to participate in a ritual scheme and belief structure that anonymous others also share.¹⁴ Of course, the anonymity principle

only comes into operation if the religious community is large enough to ensure that no individual follower could possibly know all the other followers. And it turns out that there are factors at play in routinized religions that encourage rapid spread, and therefore large-scale religious communities. One of the most important of these is the emphasis on oratory and religious leadership.

8. The presence of religious leaders is conducive to the religion spreading widely.

The fact that the religious teachings are expressed in oratory, on the part of great leaders (or their deputized representatives), means that these teachings are readily transportable. Only one or a few proselytizing leaders or good evangelists are required to spread the Word to very large populations.¹⁵

In sum, the doctrinal mode of religiosity consists of a suite of mutually reinforcing features. When these features coalesce, they tend to be very robust historically and may last for centuries and even for millennia. At the root of all this is a set of cognitive causes deriving from the ways in which frequently repeated activities and beliefs are handled in human memory.

The Imagistic Mode of Religiosity

The sorts of practices that lead to the coalescence of imagistic features are invariably low frequency (rarely enacted). They are also, without exception, highly arousing. Examples might include traumatic and violent initiation rituals, ecstatic practices of various cults, experiences of collective possession and altered states of consciousness, and extreme rituals involving homicide or cannibalism. These sorts of religious practices, although taking very diverse forms, are extremely widespread.¹⁶ Archaeological and historical evidence suggests they are also the most ancient forms of religious activity.¹⁷ As with the doctrinal mode, the coalescence of features of the imagistic mode derives its robustness from the fact that these features are causally interconnected or mutually reinforcing. Once again, this claim rests on a series of testable hypotheses, depicted in figure 4.3 and enumerated below.

- I. Infrequent repetition and high arousal activate episodic memory.

Rarely performed and highly arousing rituals invariably trigger vivid and enduring episodic memories among the people who participate in them. It appears to be a combination of episodic distinctiveness, emotionality, and consequentiality that together result in lasting autobiographical memories.¹⁸

These memories can be so vivid and detailed that they can take the form of (what some psychologists call) flashbulb memories.¹⁹ It is almost as if a camera has gone off in one's head, illuminating the scene, and preserving it forever in memory. The effects of infrequent performance and high levels of arousal should be thought of in terms of processes of selection. Religious practices that are rarely performed, but which elicit low levels of arousal, are unlikely to be passed on: people will rapidly forget the procedures, and especially their meanings, during the long gaps between performances;²⁰ even if they could remember some aspects of the rituals, their lack of thought about these practices for long periods would not be conducive to high motivation. In short, rarely performed religious practices that survive tend to involve high levels of arousal, and this is due to the triangular nexus of causes indicated in figure 4.3.

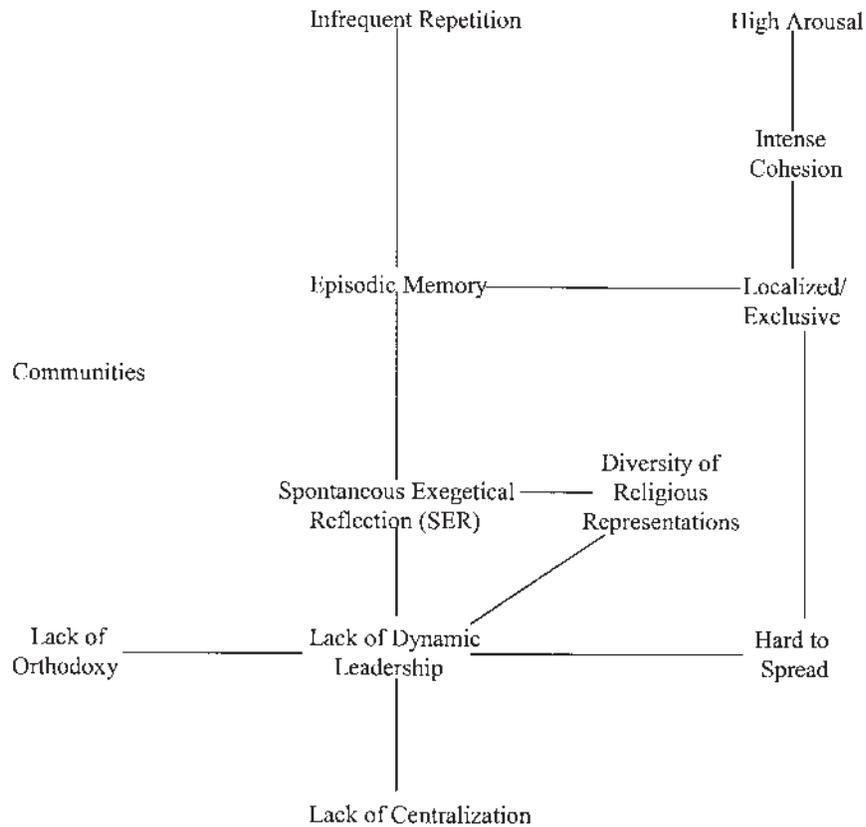


Figure 4.3. The Imagistic Mode of Religiosity

2. Activation of episodic memory triggers spontaneous exegetical reflection, leading to expert exegetical frameworks stored in semantic memory.

The combination of infrequent repetition and high arousal may provide excellent conditions for remembering the details of religious procedures, such as ritual actions. But it does not seem to help people to remember verbally transmitted information, such as doctrines and narratives.²¹ It turns out that this needn't matter. In fact, the meaning and salience of rare, climactic rituals usually lies in their capacity to trigger spontaneous exegetical reflection (SER)—often experienced as personal inspiration or revelation. The key to understanding this lies in the fact that episodic memory is a type of explicit memory. This means that rare, climactic rituals are processed at a conscious level. Not surprisingly, people tend to reflect extensively on these experiences, and speculate about their significance and meaning.²² This eventually results in elaborate, if idiosyncratic, exegetical knowledge stored in semantic memory. An important factor here is that elevated arousal is occasioned typically by sensory stimulation (often using a variety of channels—auditory, visual, kinesthetic, olfactory, etc.). This in turn encourages people to draw associations between different images evoked in religious ceremonies, which are rooted in the way perception is organized (McCauley 2001). Two points need to be borne in mind here. The first is that rare and climactic rituals evoke abundant inferences, producing a sense of multivalence and multivocality of religious imagery, experienced as personal and unmediated inspiration. The second requires a separate hypothesis, illustrated in point three.

3. SER leads to a diversity of religious representations.

The personal experiences and revelations triggered by rare, climactic rituals tend to be quite unique. They may converge on certain themes and central ideas, but there is nothing resembling the kind of uniformity of belief that characterizes doctrinal orthodoxies. The principle of agreement, if it is invoked at all, applies only to the ritual procedures themselves and not to their meanings.²³ If exegesis is verbally transmitted, it is restricted to “experts” whose adherence to the principle of agreement may well be asserted but seldom demonstrated.²⁴

4. SER and representational diversity inhibit dynamic leadership.

If a fertile and compelling array of religious beliefs and interpretations is generated independently through personal reflection, dynamic leadership is almost impossible to establish. If a leader tried to come forward at rare, climactic rituals to advance an intricate and coherent body of doctrine, people might listen. But they would very rapidly garble

or forget what they had been told and, at least in the long run, their own inspirational ideas are likely to be more compelling than the content of a single oration. In such circumstances, admittedly, the possibility remains open for an individual, group, or class to be elevated socially, and for this to be expressed in the structure and choreography of rituals and the accordance of ritual precedence to persons of high standing. But leadership of this sort is primarily symbolic rather than dynamic.²⁵

5. Lack of dynamic leadership, lack of centralization, and lack of orthodoxy are mutually reinforcing.

The fact that each person experiences inspiration as coming directly from the gods or ancestors, rather than being mediated by leaders or priests, means that there is no place here for centralized authority. And there is no orthodoxy over which such an authority might preside.

6. High arousal fosters intense cohesion.

The high arousal involved in the imagistic mode tends to produce emotional bonds between participants. In other words, there is intense social cohesion.²⁶ People who are bound together in this way tend to form rather small and localized communities.

7. Intense cohesion and episodic memory foster localized, exclusive communities.

Where rituals are remembered episodically, each participant remembers who else went through the rituals with them. Ritual groups are based on memories for shared episodes, in which particular coparticipants feature. Consequently, religious communities tend to be exclusive: you cannot be a member unless people remember you as part of a previous cycle of religious activities; and, by the same token, you cannot very easily be excluded once you are in (i.e., your participation cannot be easily forgotten). This tends to give rise to fixed and exclusive ritual groups in which there is no easy way of adding to, or subtracting from, the established membership.

8. Localized/exclusive communities and lack of dynamic leadership inhibit spread/dissemination.

Unlike the beliefs and practices of the doctrinal mode, traditions operating in the imagistic mode do not spread widely.²⁷ Since religious understandings are inspired by collective ritual performances, the unit of transmission is the entire ritual group (not a small number of talented orators). It follows that the spread of such traditions would be inefficient and costly: either the local group must perform its rituals with neighboring groups, or the local group must be mobile (i.e., migratory or nomadic). But, either way, the practices are likely to mutate as soon as they get passed on.²⁸ In part, this is because of the lack of leaders and

religious hierarchies capable of policing an orthodoxy, and in part it is because each ritual community is likely to be fiercely exclusivist (and therefore will tend to emphasize local distinctiveness over regional unity).

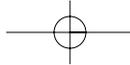
The Nature and Origins of Modes of Religiosity

The key features of doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity stand in stark contrast to one other, as represented in table 4.1. It will be observed that these contrasting features are of two types. First, there are cognitive features, concerned with differences in the way religious activities are handled psychologically. Second, there are sociopolitical features, concerned with contrasts in social organization and politics at the level of groups and populations. This clustering of sociopolitical features has been widely recognized for quite a long time, but what is new about the theory of modes of religiosity is the way it places these features together in a single model, and then explains the clustering of features in terms of a set of cognitive or psychological causes.

The theory advanced here operates on principles of selection. Modes of religiosity constitute attractor positions around which ritual actions and associated religious concepts cumulatively tend to cluster. Innovations remote from these attractor positions cannot survive.²⁹ For instance, a new prophet might discourse on his elaborate personal revelations, and audiences might be eager to listen. But if that discourse is to crystallize into a stable body of teachings, it must be subjected to regular reiteration and safeguarded by a system of effective policing. If not, it

Table 4.1. Contrasting Modes of Religiosity

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Doctrinal</i>	<i>Imagistic</i>
Psychological Features		
1. Transmissive frequency	High	Low
2. Level of arousal	Low	High
3. Principal memory system	Semantic schemas and implicit scripts	Episodic/flashbulb memory
4. Ritual meaning	Learned/acquired	Internally generated
5. Techniques of revelation	Rhetoric, logical integration, narrative	Iconicity, multivocality, and multivalence
Sociopolitical Features		
6. Social cohesion	Diffuse	Intense
7. Leadership	Dynamic	Passive/absent
8. Inclusivity/exclusivity	Inclusive	Exclusive
9. Spread	Rapid, efficient	Slow, inefficient
10. Scale	Large-scale	Small-scale
11. Degree of uniformity	High	Low
12. Structure	Centralized	Noncentralized



will be garbled or simply forgotten. Likewise, a new ritual might be invented to mark the effects of a rare event, such as a solar eclipse. But if that ritual is to establish the basis for a new religious tradition, it must be sufficiently arousing, shocking, and personally consequential to drive subsequent revelations based on SER. If not, it too will fail to stabilize as a tradition. History is obviously littered with such failures.

Religious practices commonly satisfy at least one or other of the two sets of psychological conditions specified in table 4.I. The activation of these conditions provides the underlying causes of the distributed (population-level) effects depicted as the “sociopolitical features” of religion. But it would not make sense to try to single out any one of the psychological causes as somehow prior to any of the others. There is no independent variable driving the rest, only a set of conditions that some patterns of human activity manage to satisfy, thus accounting for their cultural success.

Modes of Religiosity in the Real World

Anybody who has studied a particular religious tradition in any detail will know that religions are neither doctrinal nor imagistic in terms of the features identified in my model. In some cases, a religious tradition that incorporates all the elements of the doctrinal mode also exhibits some of the features of the imagistic mode. At the same time, this religion may embrace a large population of lay adherents who have little or no access to the tradition’s complex body of revelatory knowledge, and so could hardly be said to be motivated by it. Some rituals might be low in frequency and elicit low levels of arousal. Other rituals might be neither frequent nor particularly rare and instead are scattered across an intermediate range of performance frequencies. Some frequent rituals may be completely lacking in known exegesis, and some rarely performed rituals might be associated with quite an elaborate and standardized exegetical corpus. These kinds of scenarios might seem to disprove the claims of the theory of modes of religiosity. And if they do not, then what counts as falsification?

In the first place, as noted in the previous section, modes of religiosity are attractor positions. They do not specify a set of law-like rules for building individual behavior. The claim is not that all instances of ritual action conform to one or other mode of religiosity. Indeed, that would be impossible by definition, since roughly half the variables with which the theory is concerned itself (the sociopolitical features of table 4.I) relate to distributed population-level attributes rather than particular instances of thought/behavior (even though it is the latter that cumulatively cause the former). So we cannot say that a particular ritual, for instance, is doctrinal or imagistic. We can only say that its long-term reproduction through

the innumerable thoughts and actions of many people results in the coalescence of features specified by the modal theory. These features, in other words, are discernible only as marked tendencies within a religious tradition, taken in the round.

What the theory of modes of religiosity sets out to explain, then, is the *tendency* for religious systems to gravitate toward divergent attractor positions. It is only through these processes that intrinsically hard-to-acquire revelatory knowledge can be generated and culturally transmitted. This kind of knowledge, stored in semantic memory, might be quite unevenly distributed within a tradition. In the case of the imagistic mode, such bodies of expert knowledge take many years to develop and mature. Consequently, the less experienced members of the tradition do not yet have access to the full motivating force of its revelatory knowledge (and their participation often has to be coercively enforced by the elders/experts). In the doctrinal mode, it is possible in principle for everybody to have access to revelatory knowledge; that has clearly been the aim (if not the outcome), for instance, in many post-Reformation Christian traditions. But it is also possible for the doctrinal corpus to be largely confined to elites. In many parts of the world, the “little traditions” (Redfield 1955) of rural tribespeople and peasantries are founded on versions of elite religious practices that (for the laity) lack a systematic justification in doctrine and narrative. In the absence of pedagogic support and effective policing, we often find that lay versions of world religions migrate away from both of our modal attractor positions and settle around more easily acquired, intuitive concepts and practices (the cognitive optimum position) that consequently require neither routinization nor high arousal to maintain. Yet another possibility, and a particularly common one in some parts of the world, is for modes of religiosity to interact in complex ways.

Religious traditions founded upon interacting modes of religiosity encompass large populations but, at the same time, they are composed of many locally distinctive ritual communities. The cohesion of the latter may readily be projected onto the wider religious community, and such processes appear to have been crucial in many large-scale and bloody religiously motivated wars (see chapter 7). In other cases, however, the effect of the imagistic mode is not necessarily to intensify commitment to a set of principles codified in language, but, rather, to provide a substitute for such principles as the main source of religious motivation. It is precisely within those populations that lack access to the authoritative corpus of religious teachings—and so cannot be adequately motivated by these teachings—that we find the greatest profusion of imagistic practices. Elitist discourses would have us believe that the prominence of the imagistic mode among the uneducated and dispossessed is symptomatic of ignorance. Expressed more precisely, and less snobbishly, routinized religious rituals that lack a persuasive justification in dogma (i.e., learned via instruction) will die out unless they are either naturalized

(through the proliferation of cognitively optimal versions) or motivated by forms of religious experience and understanding that are, at least to some significant extent, internally generated. A model for this sort of motivational base is provided the world over by the ancient imagistic mode of religiosity.

Since the possibilities afforded by modal dynamics are quite numerous and complex, it might seem as though the theory forbids nothing and is therefore unfalsifiable. That is not the case, however. Chapter 9 attempts to set out predictions of the theory of modes of religiosity in a way that could be systematically falsified by empirical data from psychology, archaeology, historiography, and ethnography.

The Origins of Modes of Religiosity

The presence of the imagistic mode almost certainly predates the emergence of the doctrinal mode by a very substantial margin. The former appears in the archaeological record at least as far back as the Upper Paleolithic period, whereas the latter appears probably no less recently than the emergence of Bronze Age civilizations (Whitehouse 2000a, chapter 8). Obviously, the first fully modern humans had very much the same cognitive equipment as modern peoples, so why did it take so long for both modes of religiosity to emerge, and why are not both modes universal?

The answer almost certainly lies in the fact that processes of experimentation with patterns of ritual behavior and revelatory thinking are not random. The features that comprise our divergent modes of religiosity probably do not coalesce in the absence of some kinds of triggers located outside the mode dynamics themselves. It is hard to imagine, for instance, why a band of peaceful hunter-gatherers with abundant resources would have occasion to experiment with the extremely costly patterns of behavior needed to get the development of modes of religiosity underway. Indeed, many modern-day hunter-gatherers with sufficient territory at their disposal do not experiment in that way, even when surrounded by groups with elaborate religious models of this kind. Instead, egalitarian foraging bands (Woodburn 1982) seem to make do with relatively simple rituals and concepts of the supernatural clustered around the cognitive optimum position. In order for our distant ancestors in the Upper Paleolithic period to have adopted forms of religion operating in the imagistic mode, there would have needed to be significant external pressures.

A particularly obvious pressure for at least some ancestral populations would have been the advancing ice sheets. For instance, we know that the increasingly harsh conditions of the last ice age triggered new and often more dangerous strategies of cooperative hunting. It is possible that, initially, low-frequency, high-arousal group

activities of this kind became linked with attempts to manipulate the environment through the performance of rituals. Cohesive units formed through the communal performance of low-frequency, high-arousal rituals would have been capable of wiping out, displacing, or absorbing less cohesive bands of hunter-gatherers competing for the same resources (under conditions, of course, of growing scarcity). This helps to explain the creative explosion of artistic imagery apparently associated with terrifying initiation rites in the Upper Paleolithic period (Pfeiffer 1982; Whitehouse 2000a, chapter 8). It suggests the development—perhaps for the first time—of complex bodies of revelatory religious knowledge based on processes of SER. Such traditions, once established, would have been very robust. Ritual experts may have tried to communicate their elaborate revelations by word of mouth, but unless their attempts to transmit information in that way could become routinized and centrally policed, it is hard to see how the doctrinal mode could become established. One reason why doctrinal religions seem to have been slow to get off the ground is that there were no external pressures to carry ritual innovations in that direction until the emergence of large-scale agricultural societies (Whitehouse 2000a, 169–172). Only then did the seasonal labor cycles and the increasingly complex nature of social cooperation foster the routinization of ritual and the centralization of religious authority, allowing other core elements of the doctrinal mode to coalesce (Whitehouse 2000a, chapter 8).

An alternative cognitive account of the emergence of doctrinal orthodoxies is presented by Pascal Boyer's theory of the emergence of professionalized religious guilds (Boyer 2001a). Like me, Boyer dates the emergence of doctrinal orthodoxies no earlier than the rise of complex societies, approximately six thousand years ago. His story begins, however, before the first centralized states began to take shape. To the list of cultural traits that cluster around the cognitive optimum position Boyer adds another set of concepts pertaining to the classification of humans into different natural kinds.³⁰ People all around the world tacitly presume that the other humans they encounter can be classified according to innate properties. Explicit versions of this kind of thinking—taking, for instance, the form of racist discourses—may be highly variable in content. But what matters for Boyer's theory is that almost any kind of trait that can be associated with some people and not others is liable to trigger intuitions about inherent categorical differences (regardless of how absurd these categories may seem by the lights of scientific biological knowledge). There are those who speak this language rather than that, who have these kinds of bones rather than those kinds (e.g., based on principles of descent), and—most importantly from the point of view of religious thinking—there are those who have particular qualities that make them better equipped than others to deal with supernatural agents. These qualities may be construed in local cultural registers as invisible marks or perhaps even as physical

appendages to internal organs. But something makes these people different, and whatever it is finds abundant support in tacit essentialist reasoning. Long ago, when all societies were very small-scale, religious specialists served only a group of locals. But when larger populations came together with the emergence of city-states, religious specialists, by virtue of their essentialized differences from ordinary folks, were naturally compelled to form guilds.

As such guilds became professionalized, they came under pressure to protect their share of the market. The solution, according to Boyer, was to establish a distinctive, standardized, easily recognizable, and securely patented brand. But that required the assistance of literacy. Texts would become the guarantee of both exclusive truth and inclusive orthodoxy. Once this happened, the heyday of the lone specialist dealing in local concepts and rituals had passed. The literate guilds instead supplied *general truths* for all and, wherever possible, sought the backing of powerful economic and political interests at the heart of the state machine. Religious systems were now established around “coherent . . . generally *integrated* . . . apparently *deductive* . . . and *stable*” religious doctrines (2001a, 278, emphases in original).

With the rise of more complex and regionally standardized doctrinal systems came a tendency to “downplay intuition” (Boyer 2001a, 278) and thus to exclude the beliefs and practices associated with the cognitive optimum position. Thus, as religious supermarket chains started to squeeze the corner shop specialists, the wares that were on offer came to be more explicitly and coherently organized. According to Boyer, preliterate religious traditions had “no systematic doctrine of supernatural agents . . . [and] no theory of what these agents are like, what they do, where they reside, etc.” (2001a, 266).³¹ The wares of the local religious specialist did not amount to “such a thing as ‘religion’ as a special domain of concepts and activities” (Boyer 2001a, 267). Thus, according to Boyer, the emergence of professionalized religious guilds produced for the first time an explicit notion of religion as a demarcated domain of thought and action.

Boyer’s theory brilliantly welds Gellner’s Weberian sociology and Goody’s theory of literacy to the main findings of social and evolutionary psychology in a fashion that is both highly original and rhetorically compelling. But there are also problems with Boyer’s account. To begin, Boyer advances a series of correlations that run rather strikingly against the grain of available empirical evidence. For instance, are the concepts of preliterate, localized traditions necessarily clustered more substantially around the cognitive optimum position than, say, the belief systems sanctioned by literate elites? Detailed ethnographic evidence on a great range of small-scale nonliterate cultures strongly suggests otherwise. Australian Aboriginal ideas about the “dreamtime” (or “dreaming”) provide a good case in point. Extensive direct study of these traditions has revealed the presence of dauntingly

elaborate bodies of philosophical/cosmological knowledge that require many years of intensive contemplation to develop and mature. In attempting to convey a sense of the scope and complexity of Aboriginal religious thought, one anthropologist sums up the evidence as follows:

Australian Aborigines have incredibly subtle, philosophically challenging mystical cosmologies that posit a spiritual plane of existence that was prior to the world of sensory experience (in the “dreamtime”) but now lies behind or parallel to it. Mervyn Meggitt . . . describes how the old Walbiri man who was his spiritual guide eventually told him gently that he, Meggitt, had reached his philosophical depth and could follow no longer into the mysteries of the cosmos. Probably no Westerner has ever fully penetrated these Aboriginal philosophical realms. (Keesing 1981, 333–334)

Similar comments have been made with regard to the cosmologies of small-scale, nonliterate societies in Amazonia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971), Africa (Griaule 1975), and Melanesia (Juillerat 1992). The overall impression from ethnographic research is that nonliterate societies, in general, do not deal in religious concepts that are closer to the cognitive optimum than those of literate societies. The cognitive optimum is a natural attractor position (present in all societies) but countervailing tendencies are by no means limited to complex societies with literate, professionalized religious guilds.

The role accorded to literacy in Boyer’s model also raises important issues. Boyer rightly points to a close correlation between the presence of literacy and the homogenization of regional traditions policed by professional guilds. A crucial question, to which archaeology may hold the key, is whether the emergence of literacy helps to create doctrinal orthodoxy or, as I would suggest, the emergence of doctrinal orthodoxy creates some of the pressure to develop systems of writing. It would help, of course, to know whether early signs of literate innovation occur alongside the emergence of religious standardization or whether one tends to precede the other. Recent studies of the origins of professional religious guilds promoting standardized concepts of a doctrinally complex nature suggest that these features predate the advent of literacy in a number of key locations (Mithen 2004; Johnson 2004). It would therefore appear that the presence of doctrinal orthodoxies favors the subsequent development of writing systems, rather than being caused by them. But even if Boyer’s account turns out to provide a better fit with available data, we still have to explain how the complex systems of concepts associated with doctrinal orthodoxies come to be successfully disseminated in a population. The theory of modes of religiosity might help to solve at least some of these problems.

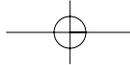
For a start, the modes theory does not attempt to correlate particularism and orality with the cognitive optimum position, on the one hand, and universalism

and literacy with cosmological complexity on the other. Consequently, it is not threatened by ethnographic data demonstrating the tendency of many small-scale, nonliterate traditions to drift away from the cognitive optimum position. On the contrary, the modes theory was built with data of that sort in mind. The challenge all along has been to show precisely *how* the localized religions of Papua New Guinea managed to generate profoundly complex revelations associated with mystery cults in the absence of either routinized forms of education or external mnemonics (e.g., systems of writing). The solution, I have suggested, is one that was discovered way back in human prehistory and has remained part of the cultural repertoire of many populations ever since—from the “simple” societies of such regions as Melanesia to the complex polities of Europe and elsewhere. It takes the form of what I have called the imagistic mode of religiosity.³²

Through elevated arousal, cognitive shocks, and the creation of consequential events, the rituals of the imagistic mode set off trains of exegetical thinking that are enduring and (over time) capable of generating highly elaborate semantic knowledge. The motor driving this process is a stock of episodic memories for traumatic ritual ordeals. These are the general conditions, I would suggest, in which the great philosophers of Aboriginal Australia, Amazonia, Africa, and Melanesia (as well as of other small-scale, nonliterate societies) come into existence. But philosophers are found in complex societies as well. Some of these are very much like the ritual experts of precontact New Guinea—the spiritual fathers of Hellenistic Mithraic cults, for instance, or the high priests of many contemporary pagan cults in Europe and North America. But another kind of philosopher was also born with the advent of the doctrinal mode of religiosity. What made this new breed of religious experts different was that their knowledge could be transmitted *verbally*, via highly repetitive regimes of teaching and reminding. And these methods of transmission opened the floodgates to processes of standardization and the policing of emergent orthodoxies.

The independent development of the doctrinal mode requires that a number of elements initially fall into place. For a start, of course, there must be inspired individuals with a complex and compelling message to communicate. According to Boyer’s model, such persons only came into existence along with the establishment of religious guilds. According to the modes theory, by contrast, such figures have been around for very much longer than that. What they lacked throughout most of human prehistory was a means of transmitting their knowledge by word of mouth. They required a forum for teaching complex knowledge to attentive and credulous audiences—a setting, in short, that allowed forms of routinized oratory and instruction.

Many factors could have been implicated in the establishment of such forums in different places at different times. An acceleration in the pace of ritual life,



caused by periods of drought, famine, or disease, might be a contender. The development of more routinized forms of organized labor might be another. But whatever the triggers,³³ transmission of complex religious knowledge by means of language required methods of sustained reiteration.

Still, this would not have been enough on its own. Even if we concede that routinization could (help to) explain the susceptibility of audiences to particular teachings (as will be argued at greater length in the next chapter), we still have to explain what motivated their interest. Complex teachings would have to be *persuasive*, and persuasiveness depends on the use of all those devices that Boyer associates with literate guilds: coherence, integration, rhetoric, and plausibility. Literacy might assist in the perfection of some of these features of the doctrinal mode, thus helping to explain the concomitant emergence and spread of writing systems, but it does not explain why doctrinal orthodoxies come into existence in the first place.



This chapter has attempted merely to summarize the theory of modes of religiosity at a very general level. As an introductory overview, it may have raised more questions than it has answered. A much fuller account of my central claims now follows. Focused heavily on the psychological variables driving the model, particularly the complex relationships between memory, codification, frequency, transmission, and arousal (chapters 5 and 6), this account is intended to fill in many of the gaps in my earlier volumes and in the above précis.

Notes

1. The dividing lines between explicit and implicit memory are difficult to draw (for a fine overview, see Schachter 1987), but evidence from studies of normal cognition (e.g., Roediger 1990) and amnesic patients (e.g., Graf, Squire, and Mandler 1984) show that such a distinction (or a series of more fine-grained distinctions) is difficult to avoid (although see Baddeley 1997, chapter 20). Many of these issues are discussed more fully in chapters 4 and 5.

2. This particular distinction has a long history, and certainly predates cognitive science. It is apparent, for instance, in William James' (1890) discussion of primary and secondary memory, and the first experimental studies of short-term memory date back to the same period (Jacobs 1887).

3. The distinction between semantic and episodic memory was first fully developed by Tulving (1972), and is now used by psychologists studying a wide range of phenomena, including amnesia, aphasia and agnosia, story grammars, schemas and scripts, and framing and modeling. For a thorough overview, see Baddeley 1997.

4. See Whitehouse 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b.

5. See, for instance, Whitehouse 2000a, 44–46, 115, 142–143, 148, 155.

6. For the most part, dogma is interwoven by strings of logical implications. Since the range of possible strings is far greater than those that happen to be exploited by religious teachers, standardization necessitates frequent rehearsal (i.e., a routinized regime of doctrinal transmission).

7. See, for instance, Whitehouse 1995, chapter 7, and 2000a, 60–63.

8. Powell and Fazio (1984), for instance, have shown that the motivational force of explicit beliefs is at least partly a function of frequent rehearsal.

9. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Whitehouse 2000a, 151–153, 172–180. Some criticisms of this aspect of my argument notwithstanding (e.g., Boyer 2002), I accept that literacy is a precipitating condition (perhaps even a necessary condition) for the independent invention of doctrinal mode phenomena (Whitehouse 2000a, 179–180), but it is not essential for their reproduction (Whitehouse 1992).

10. See in particular chapter 5.

11. Some (admittedly preliminary) experimental support for this claim comes from a study by Barrett and Whitehouse of spontaneous exegetical reflection (SER) generated by repeated performances of an artificial ritual modeled on the Catholic practice of self-crossing. This study suggested that levels and volume of SER correlate inversely with degree of repetition and habituation.

12. This argument is elaborated in Whitehouse 2000a, chapter 8. For a similar (and fuller) overview of these processes, see Diamond 1998.

13. The reality is a bit more complicated than that. Consider, for instance, conversion experiences in some Christian traditions, which appear to be constructed around episodic memories. From the viewpoint of my argument, three points are crucial to make about these sorts of phenomena. First, where episodic memory plays a significant role in the doctrinal mode, it is typically in relation to highly personalized rather than collectively experienced episodes (episodes of the latter sort tend to produce something altogether different—an imagistic domain of operation, discussed below). Second, these highly personalized episodes tend to be subjected to such frequent verbal reiteration that they eventually give rise to quite rigidly schematized, even stereotyped, narratives (thus dissolving into the standardized schemas of semantic memory). Third, religious experiences encoded in episodic memory are invariably superfluous to the doctrinal mode in the sense that the reproduction of the doctrinal tradition in a recognizable form does not depend on their preservation. In short, being a member of a doctrinal tradition (e.g., a Christian) minimally presumes some level of commitment to schemas encoded in semantic memory—no more and no less.

14. See Whitehouse 1992 and 2000a, 9–12, 40–41, 50–52, 113–117.

15. See Whitehouse 1992, 1994, and 2000a, 72–80.

16. For ethnographic examples, see Lowie 1924, Kluckhohn and Leighton 1974 (1946), Turnbull 1962, Meggitt 1962, Allen 1967, Strehlow 1965, Barth 1975, 1987, Tuzin 1980, Herdt 1981, 1982.

17. See Lewis-Williams 1977 and Pfeiffer 1982.



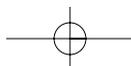
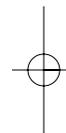
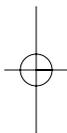
18. The evidence here is somewhat complex, but useful overviews are presented by Conway 1995 and Christianson 1992.

19. This term was first coined by Brown and Kulik 1982, and has since been examined in a variety of major studies (discussed at greater length in chapter 6). The role of flashbulb memory in recall for ritual episodes has been most extensively discussed in Whitehouse 1996a, 2000a, McCauley 2001, McCauley and Lawson 2002, and Atran 2002.

20. The only cases of low-frequency, low-arousal rituals known to me are ones that use external mnemonics and/or a compositional hierarchy of ritual elements (i.e., rarely performed rituals composed of an assortment of more frequently performed rites). For examples, see McCauley 2001 and Atran 2002. But such exceptions seem to prove the rule—not only because they are hard to find but because they always constitute practices that are inessential to the reproduction, in a recognizable form, of the doctrinal traditions in which they occur.

21. A recent pilot study by Barrett and Whitehouse suggests that recall for rarely transmitted verbal exegesis is extremely poor, and even more so for rarely transmitted behavioral procedures. In this study, a class of 100 first-year anthropology students participated in an artificial ritual requiring them to carry out a series of unusual actions. They were told that the purpose of this was to learn about the pressures of ethnographic fieldwork, especially the effects on stress levels among researchers of having to participate in strange activities. Participants were instructed not to write down what they had heard. The theological statement was delivered loudly and slowly, to maximize the chances of successful encoding. Participants then completed a short questionnaire asking them to rate their emotional states during the performance. Seven weeks later, participants completed a questionnaire asking them to record both the action sequence they had performed, the stated reasons for the experiment, and the fictitious theology they had heard. The elements and sequence of the ritual actions were recalled more or less perfectly by the entire class. By contrast, recall for the fictitious theology and even for the stated reasons for the experiment was virtually nil. This particular experiment was unsuccessful, insofar as it was intended to establish correlations between emotional self-ratings and recall for various aspects of the artificial ritual. The lack of significant variation in recall performance made this impossible. Nevertheless, our findings do suggest that the cultural reproduction of ritual actions does not require very great frequency (even quite rarely performed actions sequences will be well-remembered). By contrast, even the simplest exegetical and theological concepts cannot survive relatively long transmissive cycles. In order to be learned in the first place, and sustained in semantic memory in the long run, they must be repeated and rehearsed.

22. All rituals have the potential to trigger SER by virtue of being irreducible to any set of technical motivations (see the introduction). Nevertheless, frequent repetition can reduce the likelihood of an internal search for symbolic motivations being initiated by causing habituation and reliance on implicit procedural knowledge. This is not the case with respect to low-frequency, high-arousal rituals activating episodic memory. Whenever recall for the rituals is triggered, this will involve recall of an explicit kind that is, in turn, eminently capable of setting off a search for symbolic motivations.



23. See Barth 1975 and Whitehouse 2000a.

24. See especially Whitehouse 2000a, chapter 4.

25. In other words, the position of leader (if it exists) does not afford opportunities to transmit, shape, or direct any systematic program of belief and action.

26. See, for instance, Aronson and Mills 1959 and Mills and Mintz 1972.

27. Ethnographic evidence for this is presented in Whitehouse 2000a; historiographical evidence is presented in Whitehouse and Martin 2004.

28. Classic ethnographic studies include Williams 1928, Schwartz 1962, and Barth 1987 (for an extended discussion, see Whitehouse 2000a).

29. There are exceptions, however. If transformed into more intuitive variants or provided with exceptional forms of mnemonic support, certain concepts and practices remote from our modal attractor positions can indeed survive. But, either way, they cease to contribute to the transmission of *revelatory* knowledge or to the distinctive social morphology of religious traditions. These issues are discussed in detail in later chapters.

30. For a slightly different view of how this works, see Hirschfeld 1996.

31. Boyer is here describing the case of a contemporary nonliterate religious tradition, that of the Buid of the Philippines (Gibson 1986). But he uses this case to illustrate the *general* situation that he suggests obtained prior to the rise of the first civilizations.

32. Possible factors triggering the emergence of the imagistic mode are discussed in Whitehouse 2000a, chapter 8.

33. A detailed investigation of these issues was begun at a conference on the historiographical and archeological evidence for modes of religiosity, held at the University of Vermont in August 2002, funded by the British Academy and the Templeton Foundation, and published in the present series (Whitehouse and Martin 2004).

