

Jordan D. Rosenblum / Lily C. Vuong /  
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# Religious Competition in the Third Century CE: Jews, Christians, and the Greco-Roman World



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## Content

Acknowledgements . . . . .	9
Introduction . . . . .	10
<b>I: Assessing Religious Competition in the Third Century: Methods and Approaches . . . . .</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>Daniel C. Ullucci</i> What Did He Say? The Ideas of Religious Experts and the 99 % . . . . .	21
<i>Heidi Marx-Wolf</i> Pythagoras the Theurgist Porphyry and Iamblichus on the Role of Ritual in the Philosophical Life . . . . .	32
<i>Arthur P. Urbano</i> Narratives of Decline and Renewal in the Writing of Philosophical History . . . . .	39
<i>Steven J. Larson</i> The Trouble with Religious Tolerance in Roman Antiquity . . . . .	50
<i>Kevin M. McGinnis</i> Sanctifying Interpretation The Christian Interpreter as Priest in Origen . . . . .	60
<i>Andrew B. McGowan</i> Rehashing the Leftovers of Idols Cyprian and Early Christian Constructions of Sacrifice . . . . .	69

<b>II: Ritual Space and Practice</b> . . . . .	79
<i>Gregg E. Gardner</i>	
Competitive Giving in the Third Century CE	
Early Rabbinic Approaches to Greco-Roman Civic Benefaction . . . . .	81
<i>Nathaniel P. DesRosiers</i>	
Oath and Anti-Oath	
Alternating Forms of Community Building in the Third Century . . . . .	93
<i>Jordan D. Rosenblum and Daniel C. Ullucci</i>	
Qualifying Rabbinic Ritual Agents	
Cognitive Science and the Early Rabbinic Kitchen . . . . .	105
<i>Lily C. Vuong</i>	
The Temple Persists	
Collective Memories of the Jewish Temple in Christian Narrative	
Imagination . . . . .	115
<i>Jacob A. Latham</i>	
Battling Bishops, the Roman Aristocracy, and the Contestation of Civic	
Space in Late Antique Rome . . . . .	126
<b>III: Modes of Competition</b> . . . . .	139
<i>Karen B. Stern</i>	
Inscription as Religious Competition in Third-Century Syria . . . . .	141
<i>Gil P. Klein</i>	
Spatial Struggle	
Intercity Relations and the Topography of Intra-Rabbinic Competition . . . . .	153
<i>Ari Finkelstein</i>	
The Use of Jews in Julian's Program	
"Dying for the Law" in the Letter to Theodorus – A Case Study . . . . .	168
<i>Todd S. Berzon</i>	
Heresiology as Ethnography	
Theorising Christian Difference . . . . .	179
<i>Todd C. Krulak</i>	
The Damascian Dichotomy	
Contention and Concord in the History of Late Platonism . . . . .	192

*Ross S. Kraemer*

Gendering (the) Competition

Religious Competition in the Third Century: Jews, Christians, and the  
Greco-Roman World . . . . . 200

List of Abbreviations . . . . . 220

Collected Bibliography . . . . . 223

List of Contributors . . . . . 247

Index . . . . . 252





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## Introduction

This volume developed out of a series of conversations among colleagues interested in the intersections of the diverse intellectual and religious traditions of the third century CE. Through our individual research on this topic, the contributors have discovered that this period largely is ignored within academic circles. In fact, while many scholars tend to begin with the third century, they typically only address it superficially before springing forward into the fourth century and beyond. For example, scholars may discuss the Mishnah or the third century Church Fathers, but these texts are usually read in light of later textual and historical events such as the compilation of the Talmud (sometimes even conflating the two Talmuds, which conceal differences in both time and place) or post-Constantinian Christianity respectively. As a result, these texts from the third century are often read through a distorted lens.

Motivated by these observations, this group of scholars began to meet formally in 2009 in New Orleans at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). This volume contains the papers presented during the first three years of this SBL unit, representing the participants' attempts to theorise the third century on its own terms. Thus, the overall goal of this volume is to analyse the competition between diverse social groups of the Mediterranean basin in the third century CE through the development of broadly comparative methodologies that delineate the ways in which this competitive interaction reshaped the Roman cultural and religious landscapes. The essays in the current volume examine issues related to authority, continuity, and/or change in religious and philosophical traditions of the third century, and the ways that these dialogues influenced religious discourses in later centuries. This century is of particular interest because of the unprecedented cultural developments and conflicts that occurred during this period, which in turn drastically changed the social and religious landscape of the Roman world. Furthermore, this era is of particular importance because of the continuing influence that these events had on major religious events and thinkers in the centuries that followed.

The first unit of this volume, "Assessing Religious Competition in the Third Century: Methods and Approaches", showcases a variety of theoretical frameworks for the examination of both inter-religious and intra-religious competition. In each of these essays the authors' aim is to reassess standard

assumptions and categories within the third century through the lenses of ritual, cognitive, power, and political theories. Primarily, this unit features theoretical issues that are at the heart of this study and the novel methodological approaches that were developed in this volume's essays as a means of resolving these issues.

In the opening essay, "What Did He Say?: The Ideas of Religious Experts and the 99 %", Daniel Ullucci examines the limits of our written sources when one attempts to reconstruct the real religious experiences of everyday individuals in the ancient world. Since the vast majority of our sources come from religious elites, it is difficult to separate the complex theologies of such elites from the practices and beliefs of non-specialists. This essay explores the interaction between these poles by focusing on discursive elements (speech) in religious ritual. Ullucci argues that such discursive elements aimed to spread the cognitively complex religious concepts from the elite to the general public. Using the evidence of Porphyry and Origen, Ullucci tests the hypothesis of Harvey Whitehouse that repetitive discursive rituals are necessary to prevent religious ideas among the general public from defaulting to cognitively optimal (easy to remember and transmit) forms. Through this comparison, the relationship between the elite religious cultural producer and the (largely silent) majority of ancient people is greatly illuminated.

In "Pythagoras the Theurgist: Porphyry and Iamblichus on the Role of Ritual in the Philosophical Life", Heidi Marx-Wolf explores intramural competition played out in the writings of the Neoplatonist philosophers Iamblichus and Porphyry. In *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus of Chalcis famously criticised his former teacher Porphyry for his stance on ritual and blood sacrifice in particular. While Porphyry held that sacrifice was an abomination, Iamblichus saw it as an indispensable ritual ordained by the gods. Marx-Wolf then demonstrates how this most famous divergence between the two thinkers only scratches the surface of the deeply rooted criticisms that Iamblichus leveled against Porphyry. The debate between them continued in their respective biographies of Pythagoras, with each using the sage as a vehicle for claiming personal authority and elucidating his own philosophical viewpoints on issues including politics and the proper practice and meaning of traditional religious rituals. In sum, the essay demonstrates Iamblichus' opposition to Porphyry who disagreed with the view that theurgy is more important than theology for union with divinity.

Arthur Urbano continues the discussion of the struggle for philosophical "orthodoxy" in his essay "Narratives of Decline and Renewal in the Writing of Philosophical History." By the third century CE, the Academics largely had been denounced as Plato's successors. Critics characterised their term as a period of decline and corruption, a departure from the intent and "original" meaning of Plato's teaching. Calls for the renewal of philosophy and a return to pure origins resulted in the production of a number of narratives of "philosophical history", often, but not exclusively, in the form of biographical

literature, which situated the preservation of unadulterated Platonic teaching outside the Athenian institution, and in the circles of Greek-speaking intellectuals originating from the eastern empire, especially Syria and Egypt. In this essay, three narratives of philosophical decline and renewal from Porphyry, Eusebius of Caesarea, and the early Augustine are discussed. Urbano argues that the formation of narratives of the decline and renewal (or, rediscovery) of philosophy was a strategy employed by competing parties of intellectuals to assert and define philosophical orthodoxy.

“The Trouble with Religious Tolerance in Roman Antiquity” by Steven Larson interrogates the validity of this concept within the study of ancient religions. Many scholars of ancient religion employ the term “religious tolerance” when discussing the religious transformations of the Late Roman Empire. This is because modern interpreters commonly assume that expressions of religious toleration are found in certain imperial edicts or apologetic arguments (Christian and Pagan) from this period. However, Larson argues that this perspective often seems to rest on larger claims about the violent or tolerant nature of certain religions. In this essay, Larson identifies some of the problems with the use of this modern liberal conception in our representations of the religious dynamics of the third century (and the Roman Empire generally), especially in light of the workings of imperial policy. In addition, he offers deeper theoretical speculation on the subject with an eye towards reframing unproductive debates on levels of violence within certain religious populations in Late Antiquity.

In “Sanctifying Interpretation: The Christian Interpreter as Priest in Origen”, Kevin McGinnis posits that Origen’s use of “hieratic imagery” was a discursive strategy for asserting and maintaining the authority of philosophers within Christian circles. Guided by Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on symbolic capital, McGinnis argues that Origen creates a framework that allows for the transformation of the religious field of cultural production into one in which philosophers dominate. Through the use of metaphorical language and imagery associated with priests and sacrifice, Origen linked the authoritative position of priest in scripture with the role of philosopher. By privileging the role of philosophers against Christian officials who supervised the sacraments in this way, Origen actually ascribes powers to intellectual practices that were traditionally reserved for ritual practices. In short, Origen shaped Christianity as a component of the larger philosophical field, where textual practices take precedence over ritual practices.

In the final essay of this unit, “Rehashing the Leftovers of Idols: Cyprian and Early Christian Constructions of Sacrifice”, Andrew McGowan reexamines the ancient and modern interpretations of early Christian cultic practices. He suggests that Christianity did not simply reject or spiritualise sacrifice, but leading figures in the movement changed the meaning of the sacrifice even while contesting it. In particular, this essay highlights the works of Cyprian of Carthage, who uniquely identified Christian liturgical and organisational

categories in cultic terms. McGowan examines how Cyprian's use of cultic discourse functioned as a way of solidifying his Episcopal power over a community that was recently disrupted by the Decian Persecution. Furthermore, while Cyprian does depict the Christian sacrifice as a direct successor to the Levitical *cultus*, other elements of his sacrificial theorisation are drawn from contemporary Roman religion. Thus, Cyprian also contests with imperial Roman practices as he sought to alter sacrifice on both a practical and theoretical level, transforming it from classical animal slaughter to Christian sacramental liturgy.

The five essays in the second group continue to explore inter- and intra-religious competition, but this concern becomes more localised around ritual spaces and practices. Commonly expressed in these studies are the ways in which different religious groups (Jews, Christians, and Greco-Romans) intersect by adopting, adapting, borrowing, or appropriating ritual space and practice.

In his study, "Competitive Giving in the Third Century: Early Rabbinic Approaches to Greco-Roman Civic Benefaction", Gregg Gardner examines acts of euergetism in tannaitic and early rabbinic texts and the way these early writings altered and adapted Greco-Roman practices of gift-giving to address specifically rabbinic interests and sensibilities. Gardner notes that writers such as Philo and Josephus understood competitive gift-giving for the pursuit of earthly honours and public recognition as incompatible with Jewish ideals. However, he looks to two tannaitic passages on benefaction that demonstrate acts of euergetism that reflect Greco-Roman norms, but are adapted to reflect Jewish concerns. Specifically, Gardner examines chapter three of *m. Yoma* and *t. Peah* 4:18 and concludes that the benefactors are rewarded for their actions not by material gifts and the broadcasting of one's social status, but rather through memorialisation and the promise of intangible and heavenly rewards. In this way, aspects of the Greco-Roman culture of euergetism antithetical to Jewish concerns are circumvented to reflect rabbinic ideals, including piety, obedience to God, righteousness, and divine justice.

Nathaniel DesRosiers continues to explore competition in ritual practices by focusing on oath-taking in his essay, "Oath and Anti-Oath: Alternating Forms of Community Building in the Third Century". DesRosiers examines how this ubiquitous practice in the ancient Mediterranean helped to shape and change cultural identity in the Roman Empire. He argues that, just as swearing oaths contributed to the development and replication of Roman polytheistic society, avoiding oaths became the mark of a Christian in the same way sacrifice became understood as a test for determining Christian identity and membership. DesRosiers looks to the Roman military oath, *sacramentum*, and to Christian cultural producers (e.g., Tertullian, Hippolytus, etc.) who recognised the natural conflict that would arise for a Christian in the military (i. e., allegiance to the emperor or Jesus Christ) to demonstrate competition of ritual practice. He argues that, while *sacramentum* was a Roman oath

declaring allegiance to the emperor, Christians adapted, redefined, and theologised the term to suit Christian practices and beliefs, including the Eucharist and Baptism.

Drawing from the concern for theoretical issues on religious competition from our earlier unit, Jordan Rosenblum and Daniel Ullucci employ cognitive theories of agency and agency detection in their essay to help elucidate ideas on rabbinic laws governing the ritual practice of preparing food. In “Qualifying Rabbinic Ritual Agents: Cognitive Science and the Early Rabbinic Kitchen”, Rosenblum and Ullucci offer discussions on intra-religious competition by focusing on the food laws found in the Mishnah and the way in which religious experts (i.e., early rabbis) and more specifically, “literate culture producers” (i.e., rabbis as creators of texts) theorised and codified food preparation practices in daily Jewish life as a way to compete and define “true Judaism” in the post-Temple period. Employing Stanley Stowers’ theories on religious authority and Catherine Bell’s theoretical model on ritualisation, Rosenblum and Ullucci focus on two texts, *m. Hullin* 1:1 and *m. Shevi’it* 8:10, to demonstrate that the complex ritual categories outlined by the rabbis were not randomly created but rather present systematic rules dependent upon their evaluation of proper agency, representing both real and imagined ritual.

In her essay, “The Temple Persists: Collective Memories of the Jewish Temple in Christian Narrative Imagination”, Lily Vuong moves the discussion on competition from ritual practice to ritual space by focusing on Temple-centred literature not only among Mishnaic and other Jewish sources, but also among Roman and various Christian writings at least a century after its destruction in 70 CE. Vuong contends that such competing discourses on the Temple served as a way for Jews and Christians to express and legitimise their own identities, practices, and authority, regardless of how differently the Temple’s sacred space was interpreted. She demonstrates this appropriation of the Temple by examining the *Protevangelium of James*, a second-century apocryphal narrative that features the Jerusalem Temple prominently, questioning why the Jewish Temple still remained relevant for a Mary-focused and Christ-believing narrative written long after the Temple’s destruction. Vuong concludes that this text used collective memories of the Temple for its own identity-making and self-defining purposes in its remembrance, recalling, presentation, and representation of the Jerusalem Temple.

In our final essay of the section, Jacob Latham continues exploring ritual space in the context of religious competition in his paper, “Battling Bishops, the Roman Aristocracy, and the Contestation of Civic Space in late Antique Rome”. Unlike the previous four essays in this unit, which fit squarely within the third century, Latham’s examination extends the conversation to discuss Christian intra-competition in the fourth and fifth centuries when public ceremonies and spectacles like processions were used in Constantinople,

Carthage, and throughout the Roman world by Christian communities who wished to symbolically assert their claim over urban space and to re-invent or “Christianize” civic identities. Latham argues that, while Rome also witnessed its share of intra-Christian competition, the Roman public sphere continued to be dominated by the aristocracy loyal to Roman classical traditions and, because of their unmatched economical capital and growing resources, moved intra-Christian competition in terms of symbolic capital by means of public ceremony to the margins of the city. Instead, such competition took the form of siege, occupation, and war as demonstrated by the violence enacted between bishops and differing Christian communities.

The third section, entitled “Modes of Competition”, builds on the previous two sections by focusing on the struggle to construct, define, and control physical and imagined spaces. The essays theorise the many ways that groups utilised various places and locations to compete for legitimacy and authority. From considerations of graffiti on a wall, to urban architecture, to mapping heresy and heretics in spatial and philosophical bounds, to (rather unsuccessfully) locating women, these essays explore and push the boundaries of religious competition in the ancient Mediterranean. Further, especially in the later essays, we begin to move beyond the third century CE, which allows our readers to see how the competition continues.

In the first essay, entitled “Inscription as Religious Competition in Third-Century Syria”, Karen Stern demonstrates how graffiti served as a mode of religious competition in the Roman Syrian town of Dura Europos. Like a modern gang tag spray-painted on a building, Stern reminds us that graffiti marks territory. To illustrate her point, Stern examines graffiti at four religious locations in Dura: (1) the Temple of the Aphlad; (2) the Mithraeum; (3) the synagogue; and (4) the Christian building. Stern shows how inscribing graffiti was a practice in which individuals vied with their peers for a god’s attention. This competition allowed both elites and non-elites to mark their territory. Further, the reduplication of graffiti and their prominent location and letter sizes indicate that this practice was an acceptable mode of religious competition.

Building on notions of place and space, Gil Klein’s essay, entitled “Spatial Struggle: Intercity Relations and the Topography of Intra-Rabbinic Competition”, focuses on what he labels the “Duopolis” of Sepphoris and Tiberias (including the territory in between these cities). Arguing for the spatial nature of rabbinic competition in general, Klein notes in particular that the Duopolis “operated as an arena for the political and legal negotiations of Jewish identity in Roman Palestine”. The third century was a time when rabbinic centres moved to central Palestinian cities, so competition between sages and their circles played itself out in these spatial dimensions. Klein buttresses this argument by carefully analysing narratives about two competing rabbis, each associated with one of the competing cities of the Duopolis.

From the Duopolis, we turn back east to Antioch in Ari Finkelstein’s essay,



entitled, “The Use of Jews in Julian’s Program: ‘Dying for the Law’ in the Letters of Theodorus – A Case Study”. Finkelstein argues that Emperor Julian utilised earlier discourse about the presumed Jewish proclivity to choose death rather than violate their ancestral laws, in particular in regard to dietary regulations, as a tool to delegitimise Christian identity. In doing so, Julian redefined martyrdom: the only legitimate practice was to die in order to preserve ancestral law, which – according to Julian – meant that Christians were neither venerating nor practising true martyrdom. To construct this argument, Julian drew on earlier traditions, especially the third century work of Porphyry, and then added his own twist. Thus, Finkelstein’s essay shows us the legacy of a model of competition developed in the third century.

Julian’s project is put into interesting relief when viewed through the lens provided in Todd Berzon’s essay, entitled “Heresiology as Ethnography: Theorising Christian Difference”. Berzon suggests that the ancient heresiologist is an ethnographer, as he describes the Other and orients the Self amidst an ever-changing world. While Julian used his hermeneutical construction of Jews to critique Christian practice, Berzon shows how Jewish adherence to the Letter and not the Spirit of the Law was used to account for the Jewish loss (and the Christian inheritance) of divinely sanctioned status. Berzon’s focus on the writings of Irenaeus and, especially, Epiphanius, who both bookend the third century, shows how his model of heresiologist as ethnographer helps to understand competing ideologies and practices in the third century and beyond.

The observation that heresiology is about orientation in the world connects well with Todd Krulak’s essay, entitled “The Damascian Dichotomy: Contention and Concord in the History of Late Platonism”. Exploring the so-called Damascian Dichotomy, in which philosophy and hieratic practices are viewed as competing poles, Krulak argues that this dichotomy is simplistic; one pole is not necessarily favoured to the neglect of the other. In doing so, Krulak follows a debate born in the third century through to the sixth century, where novel and interesting developments appear. In tracing the evolution of this debate, Krulak shows how Damascius uses ideas by earlier philosophers, like the third century Porphyry and Iamblichus, and develops a model in which “the perfect blend of the philosophical and the hieratic was found”. It is this mixture to which all good Platonists must strive.

Ross Kraemer’s essay, entitled “Gendering (the) Competition”, provides a fitting end to this section, and indeed to the entire volume. Proceeding from the question “where are the women in ancient competition?”, Kraemer reminds us of the importance of considering gender when theorising the past. Ancient competition was gendered as masculine, from the gendered virtues over which they competed (often in public, a male-gendered sphere), to accusing their opponents of being or acting feminine (obviously, viewing themselves and their practices as masculine). Given that “[a]ncient competition (religious and otherwise) was not a gender-neutral site, ... analyses and

theories of competition need to take both women and gender into account". While Kraemer considers some third century evidence, her main examples come from the fourth and fifth centuries. While she apologises for her lack of third century sources, this dearth of stronger third century evidence buttresses her argument that women were rarely competing but often competed for. Her essay reminds us that our theorisation of religious competition in the third century (and beyond) has only just begun.

As evident in the concerns addressed above, our volume seeks to analyse and/or construct the religious and philosophical intersections between parallel communities of the third century and beyond in order to uncover the force of competition and influence among them. These particular religious and philosophical dialogues are not only of great interest and import in their own right, but also help us better understand how later cultural and religious developments unfolded. Primarily these essays help elucidate how contact and competition were critical to the construction of orthodoxies within these diverse groups throughout the third century and in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Equally important and representative of the work included in this volume is the development of general methodological frameworks for the study of these ancient dialogues of competition. Analysis of textual and material data that explore and illuminate socio-cultural competition allowed for the utilisation of a range of theoretical approaches, including cognitive science, ritual theory, and social-scientific criticism. Finally, the editors of this volume hope that the exploration of competitive inter-religious influences across a broad spectrum of traditions reinforces for the reader the comparative nature of our study, thus highlighting the agonistic nature of Late Antique society and the myriad ways that competition and cooperation were manifested.



# I: Assessing Religious Competition in the Third Century: Methods and Approaches



Daniel C. Ullucci

## What Did He Say?

### The Ideas of Religious Experts and the 99 %<sup>1</sup>

In addressing religious competition in the third century, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider who, sociologically speaking, the participants in this competition were. Several of the papers here, including this one, employ the concept of the religious expert.<sup>2</sup> The use of this term is a recognition that the people whose written texts form the bulk of our evidence were not normal people. They were highly educated, literate elites, representing a very small percentage of the ancient population. Specially trained and almost exclusively male, their authority and social status were tied to their intellectual production. The written artifacts of this production form the main body of our extant evidence for religious competition, which by no means reflect the religious realities of the majority of ancient peoples.

The ongoing debate over economic inequality in the United States, posed by some as the 99 % versus the wealthy 1 %, provides a useful reality check for scholarly views of ancient religion. The Roman world was, if anything, even more economically and socially divided than our own.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the work of religious experts, and how this work relates to non-experts (the 99 %) is thus critical for understanding the full picture of religious competition in the ancient Mediterranean. This paper attempts to use new insights from cognitive theory of religion to elucidate religious competition in the third century. The main theoretical model invoked is Harvey Whitehouse's "modes of religiosity" hypothesis.<sup>4</sup>

1 In developing the ideas for this paper I am thankful for the help of Nathaniel DesRosiers, Kevin McGinnis, and Jordan Rosenblum. Particular thanks go to my cognitive theory students at Rhodes College for the opportunity to test and clarify my examples.

2 For background on the use of the term religious expert, see S. Stowers, "The Religion of Plant and Animal Offerings Versus the Religion of Meanings, Essences, and Textual Mysteries" in J.W. Knust/Z. Várhelyi (ed.), *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 35 – 56.

3 For a thorough discussion, see S. von Reden, *Money in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For an example of the impact of this disparity in the spread of Christianity, see R. MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200 – 400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 98 – 114. MacMullen also employs the idea of experts as a percent of population, though he sets the number at 95 %.

4 Harvey Whitehouse's modes hypothesis was first proposed in his early works *Inside the Cult: Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

## Whitehouse's Modes Hypothesis and Religious Experts

Whitehouse develops his hypothesis on religious experts as part of his larger exploration into the ways in which religious ideas are retained and reproduced. He begins with an issue to which Religious Studies scholars have traditionally not paid much attention. Historically, scholars of religion have tended to focus on the beliefs of religious groups, their doctrines, and their texts. More recently the field has focused on social aspects of religious groups, their social formations, and mythmaking. Whitehouse begins at the more fundamental level of memory. If a religion is going to endure, and especially if it is going to spread, people must remember its core myths, doctrines, and rituals.<sup>5</sup> Religious competition is not simply a battle for hearts and minds; it is not simply a competition to get more people to “believe” (whatever we mean by this) a specific version of truth over and against some other version. It is a competition to get people to remember the specific version and be able to pass it on with some degree of fidelity. Religions compete for room in the memory spaces of their devotees.

A key revelation of the growing field of cognitive science is that there exist certain optimal pathways for the retention and recall of ideas, religious ideas included. These distinct patterns are dependent on the deep functioning of the human brain and are related to the way memories are stored in the brain. It is not my aim to summarise all of the current findings on memory, but I do want to discuss enough of the main points to situate Whitehouse's analysis of religious experts.<sup>6</sup> Whitehouse argues that the activity and authority of religious experts has everything to do with a balance between religious ideas that are easy to remember and religious ideas that are difficult to remember.

Whitehouse, along with other cognitive scientists such as Pascal Boyer and Justin Barrett, notes that certain religious ideas are present in many cultures, across the globe, and throughout history.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, certain ideas about superhuman beings or gods seem to be pervasive in human cultures. Because of the way the brain stores and processes information, some ideas are simply

2000). For a full explication of the hypothesis and its advantages over competing theories, see Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (New York: AltaMira, 2004). The hypothesis is further tested and discussed in several volumes of the Cognitive Science of Religion Series, edited by H. Whitehouse/L.H. Martin, published by AltaMira. See, in particular, Whitehouse/Martin, *Theorizing Religions Past: Archeology, History, and Cognition* (New York: AltaMira, 2004) for discussion of the modes hypothesis in relation to ancient Mediterranean data.

5 Whitehouse, *Modes*, 64–65.

6 For a full discussion see Whitehouse, *Modes*; J.L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (New York: AltaMira, 2004).

7 See P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 78–90; Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe*, 21–30.

easier to remember and pass on than others. Whitehouse refers to these concepts as *cognitively optimal*.<sup>8</sup> They play into our brains' natural inference systems and therefore are very easy to acquire, remember, and pass on.

For example, one of the things the human brain is extraordinarily adept at doing is detecting agency, even when no agency is present. Cognitive scientists refer to this as HADD, for *hyper-active agency detection device*.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to see why HADD is beneficial for relatively small, clawless, fangless, upright-walking primates such as ourselves. If you are alone in the jungle, it is far better to project agency onto every cracking twig or rustling branch. The penalties for a false positive are slight; the penalties for a missed positive may be death. These cognitive patterns are part of the evolutionary history of our species and are a permanent feature of the organ in our heads; they cannot be "turned off".

As a result of our evolutionary history, ideas that project agency, particularly human-like agency, are extremely robust. It is therefore not an accident that religions across the globe and throughout time contain the concept of superhuman agents, or gods. Religion, like all other human creations, bares the imprint of our cognitive patterns. Gods are essentially human-like agents presumed to exist *out there*. Gods have certain characteristics that make them superhuman (they have special powers, they never die, they can read minds, etc.), but in the main, they are human-like. This goes beyond the famous quip of Xenophanes that if horses could sculpt they would sculpt horse-shaped gods.<sup>10</sup> Scholars of religion often speak of anthropomorphic gods versus non-anthropomorphic gods, but this is only an iconographic dichotomy that glosses over a far more important similarity. Whatever the gods look like, they are cognitively human-like. Anubis might have the head of a jackal, but he does not have the mind of a jackal. Allah may have no body at all, but he still has a human-like mind. We could refer to all gods as *anthropoetic* – human-minded. They know things, they feel things, they want things, one must ask them for help, one must thank them for benefits, one must praise their power. In short, one cultivates a relationship with them using the same cognitive tools you would use to cultivate a relationship with another human.<sup>11</sup> Even when a particular religion's theology asserts otherwise,

8 Whitehouse, *Modes*, 29–46.

9 This cognitive phenomenon is sometimes referred to as simply ADD (agency detection device). The observation that humans over-detect agency, particularly human-like agency, was famously theorised by S. Guthrie in *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). The terms HADD and ADD are not used by Guthrie. They were introduced by J.L. Barrett in "Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2000) 29–34. For a discussion of HADD in action, see Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe*, 31–44.

10 Xenophanes of Colophon's quote is preserved in Clement of Alexandria *Stromates* 5.4.

11 These social tools include: communication; projection of Theory of Mind; social exchange; morality; identification of status; and many more. See Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe*, 46–47; Boyer, *Religion*, 120–9; S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10–12.



participants often stray from “theologically correct” models towards anthropoetic defaults.<sup>12</sup>

Anthropoetic conceptions of the divine are pervasive in human cultures because of the evolutionary history of our cognitive systems, not because they are the only conceptions possible. One could imagine the divine as an energy emitting rock that had no thoughts or intentionality but which produced results through its sheer power. This idea sounds silly, but it is no more or less plausible than standard ideas about gods. The difference is that a divine rock is not cognitively optimal; it does not fit or play well with our cognitive hardware that seeks human-like agency and attributes goals, feelings, and intentions only to objects that are perceived as animate. As a result, a story about a divine rock-agent is not as likely to be remembered and passed on. One might think of the Arthur C. Clark and Stanley Kubrick sci-fi classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which agency is ascribed to a power-emanating monolith. One of the things that makes this movie so odd, and at times confusing, is that this idea of agency does not fit well with our cognitive hardware. Rocks do not normally cue inferences about agency and intentionality. Boyer and Barrett have shown conclusively that ideas like rocks with intentions, which are such radical mismatches with our cognitive systems, are hard to remember and pass on.<sup>13</sup> This accounts for the paucity of divine rock-agents in the historical record. It also explains why *2001* is remembered more for its stunning visual effects and the HAL 9000 (a computer system with rampant artificial intelligence) than for the monolith-driven plot.

From these observations, one might expect that the major religious traditions of the world would be mostly made up of cognitively optimal concepts. These ideas would have massive advantages in dissemination because they are so easy to remember and pass on. Oddly, this is not quite the case. Something more complicated and much more interesting is going on, and it involves religious experts. Most religious traditions worldwide and throughout time contain a mix of cognitively optimal ideas and other ideas that are very far from the cognitively optimal. These non-optimal theologies are often *very* complex.

For example, the idea that Jesus is the *logos*, coeternal with the father, fully human yet *homoousios* (“of the same essence”) with God, and the second person of a Trinity, is a very complex idea. More importantly, these ideas about Jesus do not fit any of our intuitive cognitive patterns – one could call them *massively counterintuitive*. In contrast, cognitively optimal ideas are *mini-*

12 The term “theological correctness” comes from Barrett. See Whitehouse, *Modes*, 128 – 30; Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 93 – 4.

13 Boyer, *Religion*, 51 – 90; Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe*, 21 – 8; Barrett and M.A. Nyhof, “Spreading Non-Natural Concepts: The Role of Intuitive Conceptual Structures in Memory and Transmission of Cultural Materials”, *JCC* 1 (2001) 69 – 100; P. Boyer/C. Ramble, “Cognitive Templates for Religious Concepts: Cross-Cultural Evidence for Recall of Counter-Intuitive Representations”, *CS* 25 (2001) 535 – 64.

*mally counterintuitive*; they are comparatively small variations on concepts we all understand.<sup>14</sup> For example, we understand death so we can imagine beings that do not die. We understand our own bodily limitations, so we can easily imagine beings that have no limits to their power. We understand the difficulty and danger of not knowing other people's true thoughts or intentions, so we can imagine beings that know the secret thoughts of all.

Contrast these with the complex, non-optimal Christian theologies just mentioned. The idea of a being that is *homoousious* with two other beings is not a variation of any particular natural category. The concept of *homoousious* itself, or the idea of a being that is *one* but also somehow *three*, does not seem to be one that is easily or intuitively grasped. Once again, this is not because these ideas are any less or more plausible or believable. Rather, it is because these ideas about the Trinity do not fit our evolutionarily shaped cognitive systems. Projecting agents and making inferences about those agents had evolutionary benefits for our species. Humans were never in an evolutionary setting where it was advantageous to understand beings who were three but also one.

If complex theological ideas are so cognitively disadvantaged, why do they pervade religions worldwide? Where do they come from, and how do they manage to compete with, and often supplant, much simpler models? Enter the religious expert. Religious experts are not merely well educated arguers; they are people who have learned to reject simple, cognitively optimal, religious ideas and supplant them with far more complex, counterintuitive models.<sup>15</sup> The subordination of cognitively optimal ideas to the complex ideas of the religious expert is often quite overt.

In cultures worldwide, gods are not the only supernatural things around. In fact, the world is populated by a host of superhuman agents towards which people direct practices. These include witches, spirits, the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, etc. One might rightly object that these beings are significantly different from gods, but why? Cognitively they are no different: a witch is a superhuman agent just like Jesus. In most Western cultures, however, the two figures are treated very differently. It is because most modern western religions are dominated by religious experts who downplay the significance of simple superhuman agents in relation to their own complex theological constructions. So, for example, even if some Christians might allow that witches exist, their theological significance is marginalized. Experts prefer complex concepts like Jesus or the Holy Spirit over simple concepts like witches.

14 Cognitive theorists refer to such concepts as MCI (minimally counter intuitive). For a discussion of MCI concepts vs. extremely counterintuitive concepts, see Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe*, 21–30. For cross-cultural examples, see: Barrett/Nyhof, "Spreading Non-Natural Concepts", and Boyer/Ramble, "Cognitive Templates," 535–64. See note 12 above.

15 Whitehouse, *Modes*, 79–82.