Extending the Religious Mind: Early Quakerism and the Cognitive Science of Religion

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Abstract

This essay explores aspects of early Quaker history in England from the perspective of one of the dominant models in the cognitive science of religion - the "modes of religiosity" thesis proposed by the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse. It suggests that, with refinement, it has the potential, alongside other theories, to open up new and fruitful lines of enquiry for historians of religion.

Keywords: Quakerism; cognitive; religion; Whitehouse

Quakerism was a movement born in English revolution that would ultimately spread across the globe, from the Philippines to Australia, from South Africa to the US. Of all the radical religious movements that sprang up in turbulent 1640s and 1650s England - a period that witnessed the execution of Charles I, the inauguration of England’s first and only Republic, the disestablishment of the Church of England and acute social turmoil - the Religious Society of Friends was the most dynamic and the most successful to survive the restoration of monarchy and Church in 1660. George Fox and his associates were determined to establish “free” worship and rid themselves of external forms, including religious ornamentation, liturgies, creeds, set times and places for worship and, of course, priests. With peculiar language, speech patterns and plain dress, and a distinctive doctrine of the “inner light”, Quakerism spread rapidly, its members becoming within a decade possibly as numerous in England as Catholics. An adaptive theological and political programme after the Restoration ensured the movement’s transition to a sect and after 1689 part of the English dissenting tradition and Quakerism has remained a marked feature of the English religious landscape through to the present day.

The ‘modes of religiosity’ is a theory born in Papua New Guinea, in the research of the British anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse. It is a testable theory of how religions are created, passed on, and changed, based on a distinction between imagistic and doctrinal religious forms. Whitehouse's theory, based upon a broad Tylorian definition of religion as “any set of shared beliefs and actions appealing to supernatural agency” (2004a, p.2), suggests religions tend to coalesce around one of these two poles depending primarily on the manner in which religious behaviour is constituted and remembered. Dichotomous models for understanding religious form and experience have a long-established pedigree - Ruth Benedict’s (1934) Nietzschean opposites ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’, Ernest Gellner’s (1968) pendulum-swing theory within Islam between sophisticated, literate and scriptural urban beliefs and less educated, charismatic and illiterate countryside beliefs, I.M. Lewis’ (1971) central and peripheral cults within the world of spirit possession and shamanism, Victor Turner’s (1973) exclusive ‘political’ and expansive ‘fertility’ rituals, and most influentially, Max Weber’s (1930) distinction between a dynamic, emotional and communal charismatic religious form and its rational, intellectual and diffuse counterpart. Whitehouse’s ambitious goal with the ‘modes of religiosity’ thesis is to improve upon these earlier models to achieve “a dissolution of the boundaries between intellectualist, psychological and sociological approaches to the interpretation of religion” (1995, p.220).

Whitehouse argues that his theory both reveals the cognitive mechanisms underlying religious systems – differential systems of memory – and explains their sociopolitical features. Religion is a distributed social phenomenon, so the “problem of explaining religion is therefore a problem of explaining a particular type of distributed cognition” (2004a, p.16). Whitehouse is not suggesting that religions are either doctrinal or imagistic, but rather that these modes represent abstract constellations of variables and particular religions will utilize one, other, or both modes. Modes of religiosity do not constitute types of religion, but “tendencies towards certain patterns of codification, transmission, cognitive processing and political association” (1995, p.207). The imagistic mode “consists of the tendency, within certain small-scale or regionally fragmented ritual traditions and cults, for revelations to be transmitted through sporadic collective action, evoking multivocal iconic imagery, encoded in memory as distinct episodes, and producing highly cohesive and particularistic social ties” (Whitehouse, 2000, p.1). The doctrinal mode “consists of the tendency, within many regional and world religions, for revelations to be codified as a body of doctrines, transmitted through routinized forms of worship, memorized as part of one’s ‘general knowledge’, and producing large, anonymous communities” (Whitehouse, 2000, p.1). Repetitive verbalized transmission in doctrinal religions creates a dogmatic interpretative framework within which innovation is rare, discouraging independent exegetical reflection and maximizing conformity but at the risk of creating a tedium effect, “a state of low morale arising from overfamiliarity with religious formulae and routine” (Whitehouse, 2004a, p.98).

Whitehouse’s theory is based upon a number of principles. Religious traditions are materially constrained,
that is to say they are bound by certain psychological, ecological and in particular cognitive constraints that limit the possibilities for successful religious cosmologies, eschatologies, ethics and ritual exegeses. The selection of religious phenomena is influenced by features of cognitive organization, so one challenge of explaining religion is to identify the “particular mechanisms that drive the selection of culturally widespread representations in preference to all the other representations that fleetingly occur in any population” (Whitehouse, 2004, p.6). Whitehouse follows Pascal Boyer (1994) in suggesting that regular features of cognitive organization – the ability to encode, store and recall – influence the selection of religious concepts. These concepts are liable to congregate around a ‘universal attractor position’ or a ‘cognitive optimum position’ that encompasses the conditions most favourable to the selection and transmission of those concepts. The selection of religious phenomena is context dependent, and it must be borne in mind that the development and maintenance of expert knowledge, in religion as in any field, places heavy demands upon the human memory. Finally, religious transmission is partly motivated by explicit concepts. Religious concepts can be counter-intuitive, and therefore cognitively costly to acquire, so obedience to religious imperatives can require explicit overriding of implicit decision making, and the reliable transmission of doctrinal orthodoxy requires extensive study and systematic reinforcement. Across the world religions, rituals, myths and concepts of supernatural agency that cluster around the cognitive optimum position are differentiated from counter-intuitive concepts that carry a heavier cognitive load and whose transmission therefore requires special mnemonic support. Whitehouse notes that these heavier concepts, for instance transubstantiation or the transmigration of soul – the abiding “particular mechanisms that drive the selection of religious concepts that are thought capable of transcending the ordinary and brief by European standards, and diabolical cults were only of cultic interest outside authoritative sources” (Whitehouse, 2000, p.156). However, this intensified concern was mild in comparison to the Reformation” (MacFarlane, 1970, p.142). Whitehouse sees in Calvin’s churchly apparatus “the component part of a thoroughgoing doctrinal religiosity” (2000, p.154) designed to regulate doctrine and enforce orthodoxy. The extensive codification of dogma in rhetorical strings of question-and-answer that Whitehouse sees as characterizing the doctrinal mode is exemplified in the catechetical culture of the Reformation era. Innovation outside authoritative sources is discouraged, whilst the policing of heresy spurs centralization and encourages the development of a professional priesthood (Whitehouse, 2000, pp.153-56). It is ironic, then, that this thoroughgoing Protestant doctrinal religiosity established in different forms across much of Europe by the end of the sixteenth century sounded the death knell for monasticism.

Whitehouse’s reading of early modern English history is questionable in parts. He suggests that an intensified concern with witch-hunting in late sixteenth-century England can be understood in part as a reaction against the suppression of imagistic forms. The “war against diabolical cults was thus expressed in ecstatic and extremely violent ritual, albeit suitably informed by the intellectual climate of the Reformation” (MacFarlane, 1970, 201-2; Whitehouse, 2000, p.156). However, this intensified concern was mild and brief by European standards, and diabolical cults were not a prominent feature of English witchcraft beliefs, so this argument would be better transplanted to a continental context.

The Theory and the Reformation
Whitehouse’s model emerges out of a post-Reformation Christian tradition, his observations in Papua New Guinea of the interaction between an indigenous pre-contact religious culture and missionary Christianity. Missionary Christianity can be viewed as the tail end of an historical trajectory that began in the Reformation era, one that suppressed imagistic practices in favour of establishing doctrinal orthodoxies. Late medieval Christianity included practices that Whitehouse terms imagistic like pilgrimages and carnivals, alongside a doctrinal mode that he identifies operating most comprehensively within monastic communities, with its extensively verbalized doctrine and exegesis, highly routinized rituals and doctrinal uniformity within a hierarchical and centralized ecclesiastical structure. Whitehouse attributes the rapid and wide dissemination of Reformed Christianity in large part to its preoccupation with eliminating imagistic forms and establishing doctrinal ones, citing Patrick Collinson’s evocative description of some second-generation Protestant preachers’ attitude to imagistic practices as a sort of ‘logocentric iconophobia’ (Collinson, 1997). However, Tessa Watt (1991, pp.136-90) have both argued that Collinson’s catchy phrase veers towards over-statement. The suppression of imagistic practices was never more than partially successful and, as Euan Cameron has observed, innovative localized imagistic groups sporadically disrupted newly established doctrinal orthodoxies across Reformation Europe (Cameron 1991, p.397; Whitehouse, 2000, p.156). However, Whitehouse sees in Calvin’s churchly apparatus “the final component for a thoroughgoing doctrinal religiosity” (2000, p.154) designed to regulate doctrine and enforce orthodoxy. The extensive codification of dogma in rhetorical strings of question-and-answer that Whitehouse sees as characterizing the doctrinal mode is exemplified in the catechetical culture of the Reformation era. Innovation outside authoritative sources is discouraged, whilst the policing of heresy spurs centralization and encourages the development of a professional priesthood (Whitehouse, 2000, pp.153-56). It is ironic, then, that this thoroughgoing Protestant doctrinal religiosity established in different forms across much of Europe by the end of the sixteenth century sounded the death knell for monasticism.

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Other queries have been voiced over Whitehouse’s model and his historical interpretation. The medievalist Anne Clark has identified powerful emotional experiences of a visionary and ecstatic nature within the monasteries and nunneries, emotional experiences tied to the textual, visual, aural or olfactory stimuli of everyday doctrinal religious practice within routinized environments. In a strictly hierarchical and highly policed, high-frequency ritual religious environment, intense emotional experiences were incorporated that expanded the cognitive possibilities of routinized worship (Clark, 2004, pp.130-131). Outside the monastic walls in the world of lay popular religion, Clark questions Whitehouse’s assumption that the formation of religious identity is dependent upon the grasp of a stable body of basic religious knowledge transmitted in part through ritual. She suggests that the practices associated with the cult of the Virgin Mary, which in the later Middle Ages became increasingly emotionally orientated, fostered a devotional relationship between the worshipper and the object of worship that could take priority over the transmission of religious knowledge highlighted by Whitehouse (Clark, 2004, pp.131-7). Clark is also unconvinced by Whitehouse’s identification of a tedium effect within doctrinal religion acting as a prompt to imagistic revitalization or break-away movements. She highlights how the musical keys of the Psalms designed to heighten emotions, the meditative style of reading that encouraged free association, the architecture and ornamentation that stimulated visual senses, and the collective design of monastic worship seeking “the dissolution of ego into the communal identity” (Clark, 2004, p.128) all militated against tedium within the monastic environment.

To mitigate the tedium effect identifiable within doctrinal modes of religiosity, Whitehouse has suggested that some Melanesian Christians had incorporated “more sensually and emotionally evocative forms of routinized worship” like Pentecostalism (Whitehouse, 2000, p.148). However, whilst Pentecostalism and other forms of more charismatic Christian worship are more overtly emotional and less rigid in form and practice, this does not necessarily make them less prone to tedium. Whitehouse seems to have recognized as much in a later work, suggesting that whilst charismatic churches can create elevated emotional states in believers, it “seems unlikely” that they can maintain these arousal levels with regular participants (2004, 99). He has left the question open pending further empirical studies. Clark’s point that it is not self-evident that repeated rituals are inevitably boring is well made though (2004, p.125), and this is one area where the cognitive science paradigm remains significantly detached from the nature of religious experience. Taking her argument on board, Whitehouse has suggested that these practices can be interpreted as a “domestication” of imagistic practices by an essentially doctrinal religion (2004b, p.226), but the tedium effect arguably constitutes a weak link in Whitehouse’s theoretical chain. Clark’s broader criticism is that whilst Whitehouse’s anthropological and ethnographic study of Papua New Guinea religious beliefs and practices has fed into a coherent and well-developed notion of imagistic religion, discussion of doctrinal religion, for instance Anglicanism, has been conducted in far more generalized terms and what is lacking is a stable body of evidence “for the doctrinal mode as it exists in long-term stable communities of people committed to its teachings, rituals and social organization” (2004, p.125). Historians can help fill in these blanks.

From a more positively critical perspective, Ted Vial has questioned whether the application of imagistic terminology to pre-Reformation religious practices is buying back into a now discredited narrative created by contemporary reformers that viewed most of medieval Christendom as half-Christian, half-pagan, a narrative that offers superficial correspondence to Papua New Guinea. The target of Protestant and Catholic reformers alike was not just the establishment of doctrinal purity but the elimination of a proliferation of medieval folk ritual practices which might at first glance seem imagistic. The apotropaic use of ritual objects in late medieval Catholic practice, for instance, may be conceived to be magical to some extent, but Vial suggests that this does not necessarily render them imagistic as they were frequently repeated, orally transmitted and to a degree regulated by the parish priest as representative of the Church. Appearances, he warns, can be deceptive (Vial, 2004, p.147). Vial’s concern is reflective of a shift towards greater sensitivity to the Catholic context most influentially evident in English Reformation historiography in the work of Christopher Haigh and Eamon Duffy, and if Whitehouse’s model is to prove useful to Reformation historians it will have to be able to negotiate this subtler and more sophisticated historiographical terrain.

The Theory and the Quakers

Early Quakerism can be viewed as an imagistic style splinter-group from doctrinal Anglicanism, one that rapidly adopted more of the characteristics of doctrinal religion to ensure its survival, but only with important qualifications. For instance, it was not tedium but an agitation to inaugurate the reign of the saints on earth that lay behind the explosion of religious radicalism in 1640s and 1650s England from which Quakerism emerged, and the rapid expansion of the movement is a doctrinal characteristic. Whitehouse describes imagistic rituals as low frequency and highly arousing, including ecstatic practices and altered states of consciousness (2004, p.70). Historians have described early Quakerism as essentially an ecstatic movement (Reay, 1984) or as a fully Spirit-led, charismatic movement (Bailey, 1992). Hostile contemporary critics often likened Quakers to earlier ‘enthusiastic’ groups like the Gnostics that had periodically plagued the Christian Church (Bailey, 1992; Reay, 1984). Coincidentally, Anita Maria Leopold has found the modes of religiosity thesis useful in studying Gnostic-Christian movements in late Antiquity. Early Quaker religious meetings were often highly charged, emotional affairs, in which personal revelation not the transmission of doctrine or narrative was
The Quakers obtained their pejorative nickname from the bodily convulsions often witnessed during moments of heightened religious experience, frequently accompanied by violent eruptions of noise. One anonymous author spoke of the violent eruptions of the Quakers when they met together “affrighting even the Beasts that hear them, as if God were served by their roaring and howling like Dogs” (Anon, 1656, p.6). Quakers pointed to divine not diabolical power as the cause of their quaking. These quakings were unmediated experiences of divine presence, upon which Quakers would later reflect in terms of personal inspiration or revelation. As such, they appear to fall, in Whitehouse’s terminology, within the category of spontaneous exegetical reflection. Whitehouse argues that the high arousal involved in the imagistic mode tends to produce intense social cohesion and that people bound together this way “tend to form rather small and localized communities” (2004, p.73). There is plentiful evidence of intense social cohesion amongst the Quakers, fashioned internally through membership of the saints and shared practices, language and apparel, and externally from the opprobrium of outsiders. Converts to Quakerism spoke in terms of joining a new, spiritual family, an experience heightened emotionally by the fact that their conversion often caused long-term breaches with their worldly family. However, Quakerism spread rapidly through an aggressive evangelization campaign backed by powerful preachers and a coordinated deluge of publications. Whitehouse associates imagistic religions with a diffuse egalitarianism of religious experience in which individuals were unable to impose centralized leadership. George Fox's resemblance to Weber’s characterization of charismatic leadership would seem to indicate Quakerism deviating from Whitehouse’s imagistic model here, but it is important to see through the element of Quaker hagiography that has systematically elevated Fox and downgraded the significant roles played by other Quakers. Even in the mid-1650s some hostile commentators were identifying James Naylor as at least a servant of God, a manifestation of deity, as well as a miracle worker. The early days of Quakerism witnessed miracle-working on the scale of the early Church (Thomas, 1973, p.150). Fox himself said it would be too tedious to mention all the miracles he had performed so he recorded a representative sample of over 150 in his Book of Miracles (Geron, 2004, p.51).

Following Whitehouse’s model, we would expect to find increasing evidence of orthodoxy regulation and routinization in Quakerism as it developed from a movement into a mainstream denomination of a more doctrinal form. This, indeed, proves to be the case. From an early stage, Quakers largely desisted from quaking and speaking in tongues, toned down their apocalyptic rhetoric, there was a slowing, though no halt, in the performance of miracles, and after 1660 Quakers adopted their distinctive pacifism. A new emerging Quaker leadership, led by the likes of William Penn and Robert Barclay, shifted the theological underpinnings of Quakerism to safer ground. Quakerism became a more centrally organized and bureaucratically regulated sect, with the imposed orthodoxy checks identified by Whitehouse as distinctive of doctrinal religion (Greaves, 1992, p.250; Horle, 1988). Charismatic power was sacrificed in favour of increased discipline and routinization in order to ensure long-term survival (Bailey, 1992, p.215). Other religious dissident groups in this period that did not adapt in similar ways did not survive.

Conclusion

The cognitive science of religion field treads a fine line between explaining religion and explaining religion away, and trying to achieve the former without falling into eliminative reductionism. Whitehouse’s theory, adaptive and robust as it is, offers great potential in this regard but from an historian’s perspective is still too rigid as it stands. Alongside Justin Barrett’s psychological studies on theological correctness (2004), Pascal Boyer’s work on intuitive ontology (1994), and E. Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley’s work on ritual variables (2002), Whitehouse’s model presents historians of religion with an innovative and illuminative framework through which to open up new windows on the past, but modifications are needed. There is already evidence of the model being adapted. Ulrich Berner has attempted to adapt the theory to individual religiosity in a comparative study of conversion in medieval Europe and modern Africa (2004, pp.157-72). It remains to be seen the degree to which Whitehouse's theory is sufficiently flexible to offer insights into individual religiosity. Arguably the finest study of religious experience written in the modern era remains that of William James over a century ago (1902). A cognitive model that can illuminate both the transmission of religious systems and the religious experience of the believer would be highly prized, but that is some way off. Whitehouse’s model will doubtless undergo further modification. While Whitehouse has attempted to keep the two modes apart, with variables in stark contrast to one another, scholars employing the theory have tended to conflate the modes. Clark has suggested that the doctrinal and imagistic aspects may not remain distinct both in the eyes of participants and observers (2004, pp.131-7; Whitehouse, 2000, p.309). Leo Howe has voiced a similar concern, finding in Bali Hinduism a similarly highly emotional form of devotional singing that Clark identified within the monastery. He notes that, whilst Whitehouse’s theory allows for the co-existence of doctrinal and imagistic practices within the same religious tradition, “if a social correlate supposedly intrinsic to the imagistic mode is found within what is otherwise a doctrinal religion, how do we know this is an instance of coexistence rather than a problem with the theory?” (Howe, 2004, p.150). Whilst it is tempting to view splinter and revivalist movements in imagistic terms, studies suggest that appearances can also be
deceptive here. Kimmo Ketola found, in his study of the Hare Krishna movement, that this group actually demonstrated the characteristics of doctrinal religion. He has suggested that, rather than representing imagistic intrusions into doctrinal forms of religion, revivalist movements represent a means for enhancing doctrinal forms (Ketola, 2004). Similarly, Ilkka Pyysiäinen approached the Lutheran Laestadian revivalist movement expecting to find imagistic characteristics but it turned out to be a doctrinal form of religion but with strongly emotional experiences (2004, pp.173-94). The history of early Quakerism also suggests that it may be more profitable to position religions on a spectrum between the doctrinal and imagistic and to recognize that different variables with interact with different results according to the historical dynamic at different periods within a religious tradition. Whitehouse has resisted the notion of “mixed modes”, preferring to talk of “interacting modes”, but then creating a theory is one thing, controlling its use is quite another. Building into the model the notion of a continuum between the doctrinal and the imagistic would help capture important dynamics within religious groups without sacrificing any key elements of the model.

Luther H. Martin has noted that ‘suggestions that the cognitive sciences might provide a theoretical foundation for the study of religions have appealed rather more to anthropologists than to historians of religion’. This probably has something to do with another of his observations, that ‘historians have always been more comfortable with description than they have been with theory’ (Martin, 2004, pp.7, 12). It is a generalization with a sizeable grain of truth, but in recent years cultural historians in particular have increasingly reached out beyond their discipline in search of new theoretical tools. Historians can play a pivotal role in providing the empirical evidence that will enable models such as Whitehouse’s to fly or remain grounded, and can in return benefit greatly from the conceptual insights from scholars in cognate disciplines. Where previously historians looked to a history of mentalities or to psychoanalytical theory to deal with that conundrum of historical investigation expressed succinctly by the historian of ancien régime France Robert Darnton – ‘how to make contact with the otherness in other cultures’ (1984, p.261) - they might now look to cognitive science. Historians should be able to use general theories employing human universals without abandoning the particular investigation of the historical dynamic and without squeezing round-shaped evidence into square-shaped holes.

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