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The Roman Cult of Mithras: A Cognitive Perspective

Luther H. Martin*

A decade ago (December 1996), I gave two lectures at Masaryk University entitled “Biology, Sociology and the Study of Religion”, sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Religions and the Czech Society for the Study of Religions, and subsequently published in *Religio*.¹ In these lectures, I argued for the study of religion as a natural phenomenon – a project now taken up by the American philosopher Daniel Dennett in his recent book *Breaking the Spell* (2006).² I illustrated my own proposal from Hellenistic religions, my area of historical expertise. While suggesting the importance of the cognitive sciences and the neo-Darwinian evolutionary framework they generally presuppose, I focused, at that time, more on sociology than on biology for the study of religion. In this presentation, I should to correct that imbalance with a brief presentation on the Roman cult of Mithras that is informed by a cognitive perspective.

The historical problem

The Roman cult of Mithras is documented from the end of the first century AD and over the next three hundred years it spread widely throughout the Roman Empire – from Italy and Gaul, to London and Hadrian’s Wall in Britain, along the Rhine River in Germany to the eastern limes of the empire in Syria and to those south in Northern Africa. Although a profusion of archaeological remains from this cult have been, and continue to be, discovered, primarily Mithraic sanctuaries and cult images, the historiographical problem is that no literary evidence for Mithraism has been

* Earlier versions of this paper were given as a public lecture at the University of Helsinki (October 2003) and at McDaniel College (Westminster, MD, April 2004). It is an abbreviated and revised version of my longer paper „Performativity, Discourse and Cognition: ‘Demythologizing’ the Roman Cult of Mithras“, in: Willi Braun (ed.) *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianities*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2005, 187-217. – The publication of this lecture is kindly supported by a grant of the South Moravian County.

- 1 Luther H. Martin, “Biology, Sociology and the Study of Religion”, *Religio* 5/1, 1997, 21-36.
- 2 Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York: Viking 2006.

discovered. Research on this Roman cult, consequently, has focused largely on attempts to reconstruct a presumed Mithraic myth in ways that might conform to the surviving material evidence. More recent research, however, has focused on that material evidence itself,³ and especially on its astrological symbolism.⁴ This recent research is still concerned, however, with a view towards reconstructing a Mithraic myth that might, in turn, be “demythologized” to reveal a theological system assumed to be encoded therein.⁵ As this assumption was already formulated in the nineteenth century by the archaeologist Charles William King: “There is no doubt but that ... [Mithraic imagery], if it could be interpreted, would be found to contain a complete summary of the Mithraic creed”.⁶ But what if Mithraism had no commonly held and transmitted creed, or even a narrative myth, to be reconstructed? In 1990, I suggested this might well be the case.⁷ But having made this somewhat rash suggestion, I was at a loss as to how to proceed any further in the study of this cult.

In the same year that I made my suggestion, the German historian Manfred Clauss published a book on Mithraism that offered a clue.⁸ Mithraism, Clauss contended, is “an example of the primacy of images in the ancient world”.⁹ Scholars of such religions, he argued, “tend to understand [such] mythological and religious images primarily as allegorical guises for conceptual claims. But in ancient religion”, he continued, “images, or rather the ways in which people perceived images, were based upon a quite different psychology. They were apprehended directly ... In all likelihood, such images did not need to be explained conceptually”.¹⁰ Despite his important insight, however, Clauss nevertheless retained the view that “the

3 Roger Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont”, in: Hildegard Temporini – Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.17.4, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1984, 2002-2115.

4 Roger Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1988; David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, New York: Oxford University Press 1989.

5 Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, New York: Routledge 2001, 11; Luther H. Martin, “Reflections on the Mithraic Tauroctony as Cult Scene”, in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Rome: “L’Erma” de Bretschneider 1994, 217-224.

6 Charles William King, *Antique Gems: Their Origin, Uses, and Value as Interpreters of Ancient History*, London: John Murray 21886, 340.

7 L. H. Martin, “Reflections on the Mithraic Tauroctony...”, 217-224; see Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1987, 69.

8 Manfred Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien*, München: C. H. Beck 1990 (Eng. translation: Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, trans. by Richard Gordon, New York: Routledge 2001).

9 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 17.

10 *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Mithraic cult-reliefs depict a sacred narrative”,¹¹ for which he ventured his own rather detailed reconstruction.¹²

I found Clauss’ claim about the imagistic character of Mithraism, and of ancient religions in general, particularly intriguing in light of an “imagistic mode of religiosity” described in 1995 by the cognitive anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse to explain his ethnography of the Mali Baining of East New Britain, Papua New Guinea.¹³ First World religious practices, such as those described by Whitehouse, have long been familiar to comparative historians of religion as sites for thinking about religion, including those of the Graeco-Roman world.¹⁴ Some seventy-five years ago, for example, Raffaele Pettazzoni noted morphological parallels between the initiation rites of the Greek mystery cults and those of some Australian tribes.¹⁵ And forty years ago, Maarten Vermaseren, one of the great scholars of Mithraism, suggested that certain features of the Roman cult might be found among what he then termed “the primitive peoples” of contemporary Australia, Africa and America.¹⁶ Neither Pettazzoni nor Vermaseren offered, however, any theoretical basis for making these ethnographic analogies nor, to my knowledge has any other scholar. Whitehouse has.

Whitehouse modeled the “imagistic mode of religiosity” on a ritualistic revival group that emerged among the Baining settlements of Dadul and Maranagi. In Whitehouse’ description, this modality is characterized by a diversity of precepts and practices based on local knowledge that is associated with small-scale, face-to-face groups, and that is transmitted through infrequently performed rituals, especially initiation rites – traits of social organization and ritual practice which seem to accord with what is known of Mithraism.

In a comprehensive theory of divergent “modes of religiosity”, Whitehouse contrasts this “imagistic mode of religiosity” with a “doctrinal modality” that is associated with the widespread affirmation and transmission of a commonly held set of beliefs which are narratively expressed and co-

11 *Ibid.*, xx.

12 *Ibid.*, 62-101.

13 Harvey Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult: Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, 193-221; elaborated in id., *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000; id., *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press 2004.

14 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2004, 342.

15 Raffaele Pettazzoni, *I Misteri: Saggio de una Theoria storico-religiosa*, Cosenza: Lionello Giordano Editore 1997 [1924], 21-44.

16 Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, The Secret God*, trans. by T. and V. Megaw, New York: Barnes and Noble 1963, 129.

gently argued. The stability of these widespread but often complex set of beliefs and teachings are authorized and maintained by some centralized authority and controlled through frequently repeated verbal practices such as instruction, sermonizing or exegetical study.

The doctrinal mode of religiosity was modeled by Whitehouse on the Pomio Kivung, a relatively stable cargo cult that is especially characteristic of those groups in Papua New Guinea that have been influenced by Christian, especially Protestant, missionaries, which Western scholars are familiar with from their own cultural context. This Protestant religious context of Western scholars has tended to bias them towards understanding all religions as types of belief systems, as seems to have been the case in attempts to comprehend the non-Christian Hellenistic religions. On the basis of my earlier suggestions about the non-doctrinal character of Mithraism, I shall argue that Roman Mithraism is best understood as representative of an “imagistic” mode of religiosity as that modality has been described by Whitehouse, and by the frequency and character of the ritual practices associated with that mode.

The two “modes of religiosity” proposed by Whitehouse rely on and are constrained cognitively by differential systems of human memory in terms of which the two forms of religious knowledge are transmitted. It is the universal dynamics of these panhuman systems of memory that provide a common basis for comparisons of human behaviors and practices across time and space.

Mithraic practices

Relatively little is known about the ritual practices of Mithraism except that admission to the group involved initiation rites (Gk. *mystēria*) and that its membership seemingly participated in communal meals, apparently in commemoration of their initiation.¹⁷ The latter is attested by *triclinia*, or ‘eating-couches’, along the two side walls of virtually every mithraeum, and from iconography showing members of the community sharing a meal, together with scenes showing Mithras sharing a meal with Sol (the sun) while sitting on the hide of a bull—presumably the bull that is portrayed as being slain in the tauroctony or bull-slaying scene. This tauroctony is the sole image common to all Mithraic cult sites.

But it was initiation into membership, performed only once by any initiate into each of the differentiated grades of Mithraic initiation, that set Mithraism apart from official Roman religion – as it did for all of the Hellenistic mysteries. In contrast to the sacrificial rituals of official Roman re-

17 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 113.

ligion which were regularly and frequently repeated and which tended, consequently, to become routinized, such infrequently performed rituals were typically characterized by a high degree of sensory pageantry and emotional arousal. These rituals, which in some contexts are quite literally associated with life-threatening ordeals,¹⁸ are termed by Whitehouse “rites of terror”,¹⁹ precisely the description that has been employed by commentators, both ancient and modern, to characterize Mithraic initiation.²⁰

The painted scenes of initiation on the walls of the Mithraeum of Capua Vetere in southern Italy give some idea of the dramatic ordeals with which Mithraic initiates were threatened.²¹ In the first of these scenes, an initiate is depicted as bound and naked, as menaced by sword and by fire, and as undergoing a symbolic death, according to Vermaseren²² or an execution, in the interpretation of Clauss.²³ Similarly, in an initiatory scene on a cup recently discovered in a mithraeum in Mainz,²⁴ the initiating Father is aiming an arrow from his drawn bow directly at the initiate who is portrayed as smaller, naked and vulnerable.²⁵ Such scenes recall Tertullian’s disapproving description of Mithraic initiation as a “mimicry of [Christian] martyrdom” (*De Corona* 15.4).

The third and fourth panels of the Capua Vetere scenes of initiation are damaged and the scenes portrayed there obliterated,²⁶ but the final panel of these scenes shows the initiate with his blindfold removed.²⁷ This stylized scene of emergence into light out of the ordeals of initiatory darkness recalls the epitome of Eleusinian initiation by the fourth-century Greek philosopher Themistius. At first, he writes, the initiate wanders

through the dark as one uninitiated: then come all the terrors before the final initiation, shuddering, trembling, sweating, amazement: then one is struck with a marvelous

18 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 23.

19 *Ibid.*, 18-33.

20 E.g., Lamprocles, *Com.* 9; Leonard Boyle, *A Short Guide to St. Clement’s – Rome*, Rome: Collegio San Clemente 1987, 70.

21 Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I: The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere*, (Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain 16), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1971, 24-42.

22 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 132.

23 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 103.

24 Heinz G. Horn, “Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß”, *Mainzer Archäologische Zeitschrift* 1, 1994, 21-66.

25 Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel”, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 90, 2000, 145-180: Plate XIII.

26 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca...* I, 34, Plate XXIII.

27 *Ibid.*, Plate XXV.

light, one is received into pure regions and meadows, with voices and dances and the majesty of holy sounds and shapes.²⁸

The sensory disorientation wrought by an abrupt emergence from darkness into light, by the “holy sounds” of the cult ritual – the sudden sounding of a gong by the Hierophant of Eleusis in summons of Kore,²⁹ for example, or the rattling of sistras by Isaic initiates – together with the unfamiliar and exotic “shapes” of the cult iconography and masks would have established in the initiates a cognitive disorientation that would have rendered them more susceptible to the reception of the cult objectives.³⁰

Although charges of brandings (Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 40), and worse (from the sixth century, Nonnus, *In Julianium Imperatorem Invektivae Duae*,³¹ and from the eighth century, Cosmas of Jerusalem³²) were made of Mithraic initiation practices by Christian apologists, the actuality of such extreme ordeals has been questioned.³³ In any case, according to a suggestion by Aristotle, it was the psychological effects in anticipation of terrifying ordeals and not necessarily their actuality that characterized initiation into the mysteries (Aristotle frag. 15, and *apud* Synesios, *Oratio* 48).³⁴ Perhaps portrayals of rites of terror, as in the Capua Vetere mithraeum or on the Mainz Mithraic cup, represented iconic strategies for heightening those psychological effects.³⁵ As some scholars have concluded with respect to the Eleusinian rites, “[i]nitiation in the Mysteries ... apparently did not involve [any] instruction of a dogmatic nature, but was rather a process of internal transformation, founded upon the emotional experiences of [what was represented as] a direct encounter with the divine”.³⁶

28 Preserved in Stobaeus 4; cited by George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1961, 264-265.

29 Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult: The Iconography of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, (Skifter utgivna av Svenska institutet i Athen, 8, 11), Göteborg: Åström 1992, 86 and n. 128.

30 Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, trans. by A. Nevill, Oxford: Blackwell 1996, 108, 112.

31 In: Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca XXXVI*, Parisiis: J.-P. Migne 1857, 989.

32 In: Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca XXXVIII*, Parisiis: J.-P. Migne 1857, 506.

33 Per Beskow, “Branding in the Mysteries of Mithra?”, in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 487-501.

34 See W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults...*, 69, 89.

35 Anthony D. Buckley, “Royal Arch, Royal Arch Purple and Raiders of the Lost Ark: Secrecy in Orange and Masonic Ritual”, in: Trefor M. Owen (ed.), *From Corrib to Cultra: Folklife Essays in Honour of Alan Gailey*, Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University Belfast 2000, 161-181: 176.

36 Bruit Zaidman – Schmitte Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. by P. Cartledge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992, 139.

It is the cognitive effects of initiation and not so much any meaning associated with their performance – and certainly not any purported corpus of teachings – that allows us to relate Mithraic initiation practices to those of the other mysteries as well as to those of the contemporary cults in Papua New Guinea. In all of these cases, a “clearly defined social group” is constituted by passage through shared initiatory “rites of terror” rather than by any instruction in and adherence to a set of beliefs held in common.³⁷ Initiatory “rites of terror” establish, in other words, “an expression and an experience of solidarity” unlike that produced, or even articulatable, by any discursive practice.³⁸ It is the trenchant memories of such shared rites that forge a particular collective identity and provide the basis for its maintenance and transmission.

Initiation, memory and social maintenance

At the beginning of the last century, Maurice Halbwachs argued that collective memory is central to the identity and maintenance of any group.³⁹ His work initiated a number of insightful studies that explored how ideologically shaped images of identity are employed in the construction of a commemorated past. But Whitehouse’s theory turns rather on the cognitive functions of memory itself – on how “universal features of human memory, activated in different ways, might be said to mould political organization and ideology”.⁴⁰

Since the work of Halbwachs, psychologists have described a complex system of human memory in which short-term or working memory is distinguished from long-term memory, which is, of course, key to the maintenance and transmission of any collective identity. Long-term memory is, in turn, divided into procedural memory, a learned but relatively unconscious sort of memory associated with, for example, riding the proverbial bicycle, as well as an explicit memory of learned materials that are subject to more or less ready recall. The main point for this discussion is that explicit memory is further differentiated into semantic or encyclopedic memory and episodic or autobiographical memory.⁴¹ Semantic memory

37 Michael R. Allen, *Male Cults and Secret Initiations in Melanesia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1967, 5-6.

38 H. Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult...*, 112, 126.

39 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. by F. J. Ditter, Jr., and V. Y. Ditter, New York: Harper and Row 1980; id., *On Collective Memory*, trans. by L. A. Coser, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992.

40 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 5, 11.

41 Endel Tulving, “Episodic and Semantic Memory”, in: Endel Tulving – Wayne Donaldson (eds.), *Organization of Memory*, New York: Academic Press 1972, 381-403; for

refers to the ability to recall mental representations of a general, propositional nature that have been learned and reinforced through repetition. Episodic memory, on the other hand, refers to the ability to recall the circumstances of personally experienced events, especially momentous events that become conceptualized as unique experiences in one's life. In such memories, the time and place of the event, together with the identity of co-participants, are part of the representation.⁴² In contrast to the repeated and routinized learning which encodes semantic memory, it is this episodic memory system that is activated by the sorts of portentous initiation rites documented by anthropologists working in Papua New Guinea and by historians of the Hellenistic mysteries.

A particularly salient type of episodic memory has often been referred to as "flashbulb" memory. This is a memory that results from participation in some particularly traumatic or catastrophic event,⁴³ and that seems to be associated especially with the overwhelming emotional arousal that is characteristic of initiation rites. From among the Hellenistic mysteries, for example, I might mention such ritually contrived analogues to the "flashbulb" metaphor as Apuleius' report of Isiac initiates witnessing "the sun flashing with bright light" "in the middle of the night" (*Metamorphoses* 11.23), or Plutarch's reference to initiates being startled on the night of the mysteries by the Eleusinian Hierophant's sudden appearance in a brilliant light out of the darkness of the Telesterion (Plutarch, *Moralia* 81E; also Hippolytus, *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* 5.8.40 = *ANF* 5.3⁴⁴).

It has recently been suggested that the term "flashbulb" may be somewhat misleading and that what is important in such memories is less the accuracy of recall than the special episodes or enduring benchmarks they represent for an individual.⁴⁵ In the words of one psychologist of history, "[t]hey are the places where we line up our own lives with the course of

a good overview of recent research on memory, see Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*, New York: Basic Books 1996; but see Gerald M. Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*, New York: Basic Books 1992, esp. 238.

- 42 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 5, 113, *apud* E. Tulving, "Episodic and Semantic Memory..."
- 43 Roger Brown – James Kulik, "Flashbulb memory", in: Ulrich Neisser (ed.), *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts*, San Francisco: W. H. Freeman 1982, 23-40; H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 119-121; Robert N. McCauley – E. Thomas Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002.
- 44 Alexander Roberts – James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company 1885-1896.
- 45 Ulrich Neisser (ed.), *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts*, San Francisco: W. H. Freeman 1982.

history itself and say ‘I was there’”.⁴⁶ Of course, in the cosmically oriented Hellenistic world, initiation into the mysteries lined up initiates not with the course of history but with the course of cosmic order.

Isiac initiation was further described by Apuleius as preceded by a period of fasting (*Metamorphoses* 11.23), as was participation in the Eleusian night of the mysteries⁴⁷ – a somatic deprivation common to initiation rites that would heighten their sensory effects and contribute to their “episodic” character. Although there is no direct evidence of preparatory fasting in Mithraism, some scholars assume such was the case.⁴⁸ Similarly, the employment of masks apparently during initiations as well as subsequently during the communal meals⁴⁹ would also heighten episodic recall among fellow initiates and reinforce their sense of fellowship and solidarity. As Whitehouse concludes, the “cognitive shocks” produced by initiatory “rites of terror” and subsequently commemorated in analogous and emotionally heightened practices during celebratory rituals establishes and sustains, Whitehouse concludes, those “enduring episodic memories upon which solidarity and enduring face-to-face relationships” are maintained.⁵⁰

Cognitive basis for the sociopolitical features of Mithraism

Because of the number of mithraea that have been discovered, along with a profusion of inscriptions, mostly dedicatory,⁵¹ more is known of the sociopolitical features of Mithraism than is known of its practices. With few exceptions, mithraea are small, able to accommodate no more than twenty to thirty people. This, together with the relatively large estimates of still undiscovered sites, presumably with similar proportions,⁵² suggests that the Roman cult of Mithraism originated and remained organized throughout its three-hundred year history as relatively small, face-to-face

46 Dean Keith Simonton, *Greatness: Who Makes History and Why*, New York: Guilford 1994, 70.

47 G. E. Mylonas, *Eleusis...*, 258-259.

48 Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, trans. by T. J. McCormack, New York: Dover 1956 [1903], 160; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 136.

49 J. P. Kane, “The Mithraic Cult Meal in Its Greek and Roman Environment”, in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 313-351: 344.

50 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 12; also Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press 2002, 164.

51 R. Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine...”, 178, n. 158; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, xxi.

52 Luther H. Martin, “Roman Mithraism and Christianity”, *Numen* 36/1, 1989, 2-15: 2-6 *apud* Filippo Coarelli, “Topografia Mitriaca di Roma”, in: Ugo Bianchi, *Mysteria Mithrae*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 69-79.

groups.⁵³ Such closely bonded, exclusivistic communities, most often structured by claims of fictive kinship – Mithraic groups are presided over by “Fathers”⁵⁴ – are typically resistant to rapid and widespread diffusion, as are natural kin-groups. If such communities do spread, they do so slowly and inefficiently through contagion,⁵⁵ by which one group either splits into two, or comes into contact with some other group which it regenerates in more or less its own form, and that group generates another, and so forth, in a “chainlike process of transmission between contiguous populations”.⁵⁶ Whitehouse suggests, in other words, that the dissemination of such groups was through “strings of contact” rather than through missionaries with their verbally or textually articulated “strings of logically connected dogma”.⁵⁷

Although Mithraic cells were widely distributed throughout the Roman Empire, their rather rapid dissemination can be attributed to factors other than the “religious” dynamics of the Mithraic groups themselves. Even as the mobility of Egyptian merchants and immigrants facilitated the spread of the Isis cult,⁵⁸ so the mobile character of the Roman military and of its civil servants, both of which dominated the demography of Mithraic membership, provided the “strings of contagion” for the spread of Mithraism.⁵⁹ Maps portraying the density of distributed Mithraic finds, and their overlap with the deployment of the Roman military and consequent Roman bureaucratic outposts, more resemble epidemiological maps of the spread of disease⁶⁰ than they do didactic deployments of religious doctrine.

Although a common story would certainly develop and be shared within any particular Mithraic cohort and some regional homogeneities may

53 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 105.

54 Luther H. Martin, “Akin to the Gods or Simply One to Another? Comparison with Respect to Religions in Antiquity”, in: Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (ed.), *Vergleichen und Verstehen in der Religionswissenschaft*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1997, 147-159; for Mithraism see M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 129.

55 Gustav Mensching, *Structures and Patterns of Religion*, trans. by H.-F. Klimkeit and V. S. Sarma, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1976, 101.

56 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 49, 77; see Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1996, 1-7, 25-27, 57-61; Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York: Basic Books 2001, 46-47.

57 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 14, 36-37.

58 Sharon Kelly Heyob, *The Cult of Isis among Women in the Graeco-Roman World*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1975, 10-12.

59 L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1990, 56, and literature cited in n. 117.

60 D. Sperber, *Explaining Culture...*

have developed among contiguous Mithraic groups,⁶¹ it is nevertheless unlikely that any standardized accounts of Mithraic myth or teachings circulated widely.⁶² As is often the case with traditional systems of initiation, there are “strict taboos (backed by formidable sanctions) against the verbalization of religious revelations”.⁶³ As I have argued elsewhere for the Hellenistic mysteries generally, such “prohibitions on idle chatter about sacred cult activities amount to something rather different from what is usually meant by the term ‘secrecy’”.⁶⁴ Rather, as Whitehouse suggests, “[r]estricting access of exegetical discussion has the effect of insulating the intense, autobiographical quality of imagistic revelations from the ‘noise’ or ‘interference’ of everyday discourse”.⁶⁵ For Mithraism, in other words, as for Graeco-Roman religions in general, there were no roving apostles or missionaries who represented and transmitted some centrally approved or orthodox set of beliefs; rather authority “inhered in the collective act rather than in the words of the leader” whose role was more of an iconic figurehead than one of “dynamic social strategist”.⁶⁶

Mithraism and Christianity

Mithraism has been compared to Christianity since the second century, by Justin Martyr,⁶⁷ by Tertullian,⁶⁸ and by Origen.⁶⁹ Modern comparisons include the famous judgement by Ernst Renan in the nineteenth century that had “the growth of Christianity ... been arrested by some mortal malady, the world would have been Mithraic”,⁷⁰ and the current pronouncement by David Ulansey of Mithras as “the other Christ”.⁷¹ However, Mithraism, like other non-Christian Roman religions, only came to an end as the result of political policy, i.e., with the embrace of Christianity by the

61 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 16, 48, 71, 76.

62 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 49.

63 *Ibid.*, 54.

64 Luther H. Martin, “Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities”, in: Hans G. Kippenberg – Guy G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1995, 101-121; H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 92.

65 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 92.

66 H. Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult...*, 153.

67 *Apologia* 1.66; *Dialogus cum Tryphone Iudaeo* 70,78.

68 *De Baptismo* 5; *De Corona* 15; *Adversus Marcionem* 1.13; *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 40; *Apologeticum* 8.

69 *Contra Celsum* 1.9; 6.21.

70 Ernst Renan, *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique*, Paris: Calmann Levy 1882, 579.

71 David Ulansey, “The Other Christ: The Mysteries of Mithras and the Origins of Christianity” [n.d.], <<http://www.well.com/user/davidu/otherchristpro.html>>.

Roman state during the fourth century. This political ratification of Christianity does not adequately explain, however, the basis for its acceptance as an alternative to existing Roman religions and philosophies in the first place.⁷²

The rather rapid transmission of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and its broad-based popular appeal may be explained by the adoption by some of the early Christians of what Whitehouse terms the “doctrinal” mode of religiosity. In the Hellenistic context, Christianity shared this mode of religiosity only with some forms of Judaism, the proselytizing transmission of which, however, was incapacitated by Roman suppression following the Jewish revolts of 66-70 and 132-135 CE.

The foundation for what later developed as the Christian mode of doctrinal orthodoxy was first articulated by the Jewish convert to Christianity, Paul, with his insistence that salvation is not to be obtained through ritual practices but by faith (*Rom.* 1:16,17; 3:26,28,30, etc.). The “doctrinal” character of this “faith” is nowhere more clearly expressed than in Paul’s opposition to the “charismatic” practices of the Christian community in Corinth (*I Cor.* 12). Paul insisted that such spiritual practices, and especially glossolalia, be regulated by reasoned interpretation (*I Cor.* 14:5,13-15). And he leaves little doubt that it is his own authority that is to be the universal criterion for a correctly reasoned interpretation to which local revelations associated with such practices as glossolalia should yield. For his teachings, he asserts, are themselves “a command of the Lord” (*I Cor.* 14:37). “If any one does not recognize this,” he concludes, “he is not recognized” (*I Cor.* 14:38) and can “go to hell” (*Gal.* 1:6-9).

As is characteristic of the doctrinal mode of religions generally, the dynamic and centralized leadership advocated by Paul, when it was accepted and developed in the deutero-Pauline traditions, tended to suppress alternative imagistic modes of Hellenistic religiosity – Christian as well as non-Christian. Indications that other early Christian groups may have shared an imagistic mode of religiosity with their Hellenistic religious context are suggested by the collections of local “aphorisms” and “picturesque images” ascribed to Jesus in *Q* and in the *Gospel of Thomas*.⁷³ Whereas *Q* became a source for and, thus, assimilated into the “orthodox” gospel narra-

72 See Gary Lease, “Mithraism and Christianity: Borrowings and Transformations”, in: Wolfgang Haase (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.23,2, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1980, 1306-1332.

73 Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1993, 105; on the “local” character of these sayings, see William E. Arnal, *Jesus and the Village Scribes*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2001.

tives of the Matthean and Lucan traditions, *Thomas* became judged as “heretical” and rejected from the orthodox literary tradition. The material evidence for pre-Constantinian Christianity⁷⁴ nevertheless supports the continuing existence of an imagistic modality among many Christian groups into the early fourth century (and beyond) when the doctrinal tradition achieved authoritative status as the dominant mode of Christian self-understanding and hegemonic expression.

Conclusion

Whitehouse’s cognitively based theory of two “modes of religiosity” predicts that differential relationships between discursive and nondiscursive types of ritual practice, between the particular memory systems activated by these differing types of performance, and between a consequent patterning of sociopolitical association will be selected for in ritual transmissions of religious knowledge. This theoretical prediction is historically instantiated by the alternative histories of Mithraism and Christianity, which were cognitively encoded and transmitted in just these contrasting ways. The early successes of Christianity with respect to Mithraism can, in other words, be explained more on the basis of its selected mode of representation and strategy of transmission than by any presumed content of its message.⁷⁵ The latter is, after all, largely shared with many of the mystery cults in general as has been observed throughout the ages – the product of a common cultural context and of contemporaneous cultural concerns.⁷⁶ As Whitehouse contends, “control of the social conditions of transmission is always more important than determining the range of textual materials that should be regarded as authoritative”.⁷⁷ This conclusion was demonstrated, of course, by the growing power of a centralized “orthodox” Christianity and its condemnation of “deviant” forms of Christianity as heretical – whether those forms were characterized by imagistic practice or by doctrinal nonconformity.⁷⁸

74 Graydon R. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, Macon: Mercer University Press 2003.

75 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 80.

76 E.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparisons of Early Christianites and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1990, esp. 143-166.

77 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 177.

78 Luther H. Martin, “Redescribing Christian Origins: Historiography or Exegesis?”, in: Ron Cameron – Merrill Miller (eds.), *Redescribing Christian Origins*, Atlanta: Scholar’s Press – Leiden: E. J. Brill 2004, 475-481.



The appealing feature of cognitive-based models, such as that proposed by Whitehouse, for the historical and comparative study of religion is that they incorporate but go beyond the familiar metaphors, typologies and sets of concepts previously developed on the basis of ethnographic, historical and sociological descriptions.⁷⁹ Rather, cognitive models advance theoretical explanations grounded in common features of human cognition and offer, thereby, a transcultural and transhistorical basis for the organization and interpretation of human behavior and thought, and of their historical remains.⁸⁰

79 H. Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult...*, 203-217; id., *Arguments and Icons...*, 3-4.

80 H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons...*, 11; see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, 25-26.



SUMMARY

The Roman Cult of Mithras: A Cognitive Perspective

Explorations by cognitive scientists into the panhuman biases of and constraints upon the processing and transmission of perceptual as well as conceptual information by human brains promises historians a scientifically-based set of theories with which to reconstruct past scenarios with greater confidence than previous methods have allowed. This article exemplifies this promise by employing one cognitively based theory, based upon two distinct systems of human memory, for a preliminary study of the Roman Cult of Mithras. Historians have previously understood Mithraism as a cultic tradition with a more or less common cultic myth which historians – despite any textual evidence for the cult – might decode from its abundant material remains. The transmission of such a widely shared myth would have depended upon an encoding of such information into the semantic memory of initiates. The encoding of shared information into semantic memory requires, however, repetition and members of Mithraic groups were initiated but once into their respective initiatory grades. The emotional arousal associated with these rites suggests an encoding of the initiatory experience into episodic memory, recall from which results in solidarity – and even shared knowledge – among a particular group of initiates but argues against any Mithraic myth held in common by all Mithraic groups.



RESUMÉ

Římský kult boha Mithry. Pohled kognitivních věd

Výzkumy kognitivních vědců ohledně všelidských tendencí a omezení, které ovlivňují zpracování a přenos smyslových a také pojmových informací lidským mozkem, slibují poskytnout historikům vědecky ukotvené teorie, s jejichž pomocí bude možné rekonstruovat minulé děje s větší mírou důvěryhodnosti, než jakou dovolovaly předchozí metody. Tento článek je názornou demonstrací těchto možností, neboť využívá jedné z kognitivních teorií, založené na dvou distinktivních typech lidské paměti, k předběžnému studiu římského kultu boha Mithry. Badatelé dříve chápali mithraismus jako tradici s více či méně široce sdíleným kultovním mýtem, který by jimi mohl být – navzdory neexistenci jakýchkoli literárních zdrojů – rozluštěn na základě bohatých pozůstatků hmotné kultury. Přenos široce sdíleného mýtu tohoto druhu by ale závisel na „zápisu“ těchto informací do sémantické paměti zasvěcence. „Zápis“ sdílených informací do sémantické paměti nicméně vyžaduje opakování. Členové mithraistických komunit však podstoupili zasvěcení do svých příslušných iniciačních stupňů pouze jednou. Emoční vzrušení spojené s těmito rituály poukazuje spíše na „zápis“ iniciační zkušenosti do paměti epizodické. Vzpomínky na události v ní uložené vedou k solidaritě – a dokonce sdílené znalosti – uvnitř konkrétní skupiny zasvěcenců, hovoří však proti představě mithraistického mýtu sdíleného v rámci všech mithraistických komunit.

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