Why rituals?

What role did rituals play in the emergence of early Christian religion? How can the history of early Christianity be explained from the perspective of ritual behaviour? These questions have seldom been raised in New Testament or early Christian studies, although, in recent years, there has been considerable interest in the social aspects of early Christianity. It is true that some initial efforts have been made to apply ritual studies to the study of biblical texts. These do not, however, change the general picture:

1 It does not seem necessary to me to start with a definition of cultural ritual in general or religious ritual in particular. Like many other anthropological terms, ‘ritual’ is not really an analytical category but rather what is usually called a family-resemblance category. It is possible to list general properties of ritualised behaviour (e.g., it has no empirical goals and shows compulsion, rigidity, repetition, orderly environment, concern with pollution and cleansing; this list is from P. Lienard and P. Boyer, ‘Whence Collective Rituals? A Cultural Selection Model of Ritualized Behavior’, *American Anthropologist* 108 (2006), pp. 814-827; for different lists, see G. D. Lewis, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 6-38; R. L. Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia, SC, 1990), p.14 and R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* [Cambridge, 1999], pp. 32-50). One should note, however, that not all these features are shared by all such actions that religious people and scholars usually recognise as rituals. Moreover, although important theoretically, the distinction between cultural and religious rituals is not particularly relevant in the world of early Christianity since most ancient rituals were somehow connected with the activity or presence of superhuman beings. For a strict definition of ‘religious ritual’, see R. N. McCauley and T. E. Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 13-16. See also the discussion on McCauley and Lawson’s theory below.

2 I am bracketing here the whole field of early Christian liturgical study since it has had little influence on other branches of early Christian studies or interaction with ritual studies in general.

scholars do not usually give rituals a significant place in their reconstructions or
descriptions of Christian origins.\(^4\)

One may list several reasons for the fact that rituals have been a neglected and
underestimated topic. One obvious reason is that the New Testament authors do not
very often refer to rituals,\(^5\) and whenever they do, they are not very specific. We know
precious little about the actual performance of early Christian rituals, at least when it
comes to the New Testament period of Christian history. The evidence needed to
undertake a ritual analysis of early Christian religion seems to be sparse, although not
insufficient, as I hope to be able to demonstrate in this article.

Moreover, a long and persistent antiritualistic tradition, rooted in the
Reformation’s emphasis on inner experience and polemics against Judaism and
Catholicism, has influenced Protestant biblical scholars.\(^6\) Certainly, recent
developments in religious studies have created a strong opinion against this tradition
and the study of ritual has established itself as an important field with rich theoretical
discussions and detailed ethnographic data.\(^7\) However, in spite of the few attempts to
bring ritual into focus, the majority of biblical scholarship has focussed on aspects of

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\(^4\) L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand
 Rapids, MI, 2003) could be seen as one important exception. But although Hurtado
wishes to embrace both beliefs and practices in his term ‘Christ-devotion’, his focus is
more on the development of ideas of Jesus than on the function that rituals themselves
played in the formation of early Christian religion.


\(^6\) F. H. Gorman, ‘Ritual Studies and Biblical Studies: Assessment of the Past, Prospects

\(^7\) R. L. Grimes, *Research in Ritual Studies: A Programmatic Essay and Bibliography*
(Metuchen, NJ, 1985); C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford, 1997); F.
A. Salamone, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals and Festivals* (New York,
2004).
early Christian religion other than ritual, such as myth, history, ethics, doctrines, and, more recently, politics.

The dismissal of ritual could furthermore be justified by the early Christian writers’ emphasis on ‘belief’. It has been noted that, in the context of the religious cults of antiquity, early Christian rituals were not particularly impressive. For one thing, the first Christians did not sacrifice, which was one of the most conspicuous features of both Jewish and Greco-Roman religions. Thus, it can be argued that when early Christian teachers, such as Paul, placed belief in Christ at the center of religious identity, they championed a type of religiosity that was rather different from other religious traditions in the Greco-Roman world. Although *pistis* had been a term for religious piety since Plato, most people thought of *religio* as the observation of established rites, rather than as a belief in a certain deity. Perhaps ritual was not a big thing for early Christians, after all?

I do not think this claim captures the situation of the earliest Christians in general. What matters here, however, is the question whether ritual behavior can be used as an analytical tool for understanding and explaining the rise, survival, and evolution of the early Christian movement. At this point, I would like to discuss three general considerations which motivate me to pursue the significance of ritual behavior in the formation of early Christianity.

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First, it is largely acknowledged that the Jesus movement somehow emerged out
of the movement created by John the Baptist.\(^{11}\) The most established historical fact of
John’s activity was his performing baptisms, which gave rise to his nickname ‘Baptist’
or ‘Immerser’ (Gr. \textit{baptistēs} or \textit{baptizōn}).\(^{12}\) Ritual washing for the ‘forgiveness of sins’
(Mark 1:4) or ‘consecration of the body’ (Josephus, \textit{Ant.} 18.117) was a distinctive mark
of his ministry. Much has been written about the cultural background of John’s
baptism.\(^{13}\) Various forms of ritual bathing and washing were widely practiced in Second
Temple Judaism, and it is clear that John’s rite should be seen in the context of these
practices.\(^{14}\) Since the evidence is slight, we should be cautious not to emphasise the
uniqueness of John’s baptism to a degree that separates it completely from all other
Jewish practices.\(^{15}\) Most scholars, however, would agree that there was a great deal of
innovation in the ritual immersion performed by John (which of course does not mean
that other Jewish groups, such as the Essenes and the Qumran community, were \textit{not}


\(^{15}\) Taylor argues that John’s baptism must be considered ‘in line of other Jewish immersions rather than something wholly unique and distinct’. Taylor, \textit{The Immerser}, 57. But she, too, admits that ‘there is no clear parallel in any current Jewish immersion rite for someone acting as an immerser alongside the person who is being immersed in the water’ (ibid., p. 50).
ritually innovative).\textsuperscript{16} Jesus probably did not become an active baptiser,\textsuperscript{17} but his followers quickly adopted John’s baptism and turned it into an initiatory rite of their own movement. This development includes a number of historical conundrums that cannot be discussed within the limit of this article. What is important here is that the emergence of these closely intertwined movements was accompanied by a ritual innovation – I will return to this novelty of John’s and early Christians’ baptismal practices a little later.

The second point that motivates me to pursue the significance of early Christian rituals is related to the first. Very soon after the death of Jesus, early Christians performed rites which made their cultic life distinguishable from other cults and religions in the Greco-Roman world. The most important were, of course, baptism and the Eucharist. As for the latter, it must be emphasised again that the historical development from the ‘table fellowship’ of Jesus’ with his disciples and friends to the early Christian eucharistic meal is in many ways shrouded in uncertainty.\textsuperscript{18} In any case, Paul’s letters, written two decades after Jesus’ death, clearly indicate that the rites were there, almost from the beginning. People became attached to the movement by means of these rituals, and it is tempting to take ritual as a lens through which to scrutinise the evolution of early Christian religion.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Although poignant and simplified, Morton Smith’s view of John’s baptism seems basically right: ‘To introduce...a new, inexpensive, generally available, divinely authorized rite, effective for the remission of all sins, was John’s great innovation’. M. Smith, \textit{Jesus the Magician} (San Francisco, 1978), p.208.\textsuperscript{16}
\item[17] Cf., however, the arguments for Jesus’ baptizing activity in Meier, \textit{A Marginal Jew}, pp. 116-130.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{footnotes}
Thirdly, some recent theories of ritual seek to do exactly this, that is, they focus on the role of rituals in the formation and social dynamics of religious movements. I am speaking of the theories developed in the cognitive science of religion. This is a new, multidisciplinary field that emerged during the 1990s, drawing on cognitive science, cognitive and developmental psychology, neuroscience, evolutionary biology and anthropology. The cognitive science of religion seeks to explain how certain cognitive constraints, such as memory and action representation system, exert selection pressures on all religious systems. The cognitive approach examines religions from the perspective of evolution; in other words, it is interested in the question of how religious systems go through an evolutionary process in which they accommodate to the structure of the human mind. In this paper, I shall give examples of how cognitive theories of ritual could be used in the analysis of early Christianity, but before that, a few words about earlier approaches to early Christian rituals.

Approaches to Ritual: Genealogical, Functionalist, Symbolist

I have divided the earlier studies into three groups: genealogical, functionalist, and symbolist approaches. This division is sketchy and does not do full justice to the approaches of biblical scholars, who often freely combine different research traditions.

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20 McCauley and Lawson, Bringing Ritual to Mind, p. 179.
but it demonstrates some important trends and interpretative moves in the study of early Christian rituals.

**Genealogical approaches.** Biblical scholars have always been keen on origin. Source criticism and form criticism concentrated on the issues of literary influence or original form. A classic example of the source-critical approach to early Christian rituals is Hans Lietzmann’s *Mass and Lord’s Supper*, in which he traces the later eucharistic liturgies back to two basic archetypes, the agape meal and the Eucharist.\(^{21}\) The members of the history-of-religions school were fascinated by the influence of Hellenistic-Roman religions and particularly of the mystery cults on early Christian myth and ritual.\(^{22}\) The occupation with issues of ‘borrowing from’ and ‘independence of’ non-Christian religious traditions has exerted a deep influence on the study of the New Testament and early Christianity.\(^{23}\)

Many of the studies carried out in the late 19th and early 20th century were groundbreaking for the study of early Christian rituals. The history-of-religions school did not underestimate the influence of rituals on the formation of early Christian religion. Wilhelm Bousset, for example, in his *Kyrios Christos*, emphasised the significance of ritual in the emergence of the ‘Christ cult’ among the early Greek-speaking Christians.\(^{24}\) For him, this cult was crucial to all later forms of Christianity, although he saw it as a secondary development as compared to the primitive Palestinian


Christology.

Genealogical and source-critical approaches are indispensable parts of historical investigation. Tracing historical influences, compositions, trajectories, and developmental stages is part and parcel of my own project on early Christian rituals as well. One should not, however, overlook the theological undercurrents that lie beneath the works of the history-of-religions school and can be recognised in retrospect.\(^\text{25}\) The underlying assumption in many of these classic studies is that by tracing a tradition back to its original source or earliest root (literary or oral), one has access to the true meaning of that tradition. Since many of the representatives of the school were philologists, they relied heavily on linguistic details and treated religious traditions as if they were manuscripts deriving from a single autograph. This ‘autograph’ could be seen as a kind of pure or uncontaminated beginning (or, vice versa, as a foreign or bad influence). Such genealogical practices run counter to a truly historical understanding of Christian beginnings. Today, scholars of religion increasingly realise that ‘all religions have composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure’.\(^\text{26}\) To cite Karen King, ‘hybridity, not purity, characterises historical processes’.\(^\text{27}\)


Moreover, even if one were able the trace something like an original source of a tradition/ritual, this source would not explain why it became a tradition/ritual in the first place. Why did it spread among people? Why did people keep on repeating it? As we shall see, these questions are the crucial part of cognitive approaches to religious traditions, but at this point we concentrate on answers that come from traditional social-scientific approaches. In recent years, many New Testament scholars have turned to questions concerning the social function of early Christian traditions.

*Functionalist approaches.* Social-scientific methods, which entered biblical studies in the 1970s, seemed to provide theories and concepts for dealing with issues of social context and function. Many scholars were convinced that ‘the sort of questions to be asked about the early Christian movement are those about how it worked’. New Testament scholars began to read such renowned anthropologists as Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner but, as noted in the beginning of this article, ritual did not become an important topic in the social-scientific studies on the New Testament and early Christianity. There are, of course, notable exceptions. Wayne Meeks’ pathbreaking study *First Urban Christians* is one of them. Meeks’ book includes a chapter on ritual in Pauline churches, which discusses baptism and the Lord’s Supper as well as what he calls ‘minor rituals’ (prayer, hymns, reading of the Scriptures, etc.). Not surprisingly, early social-scientific studies on early Christian ritual often had a clear functionalist orientation or at least a functionalist dimension. Thus, for example, Meeks argues that Paul uses the symbolism of the supper ‘to enhance both internal coherence,

unity, and equality of the Christian group’ and ‘to protect its boundaries vis-à-vis other kinds of cultic association’.  

It has been argued that functionalism as a grand theory creates a kind of impasse: if every social phenomenon must serve some positive function to survive and nothing without such a function survives, how can we possibly argue against it? Few, however, would hold such a strong functionalist position. As a matter of fact, Meeks’ statement about Paul’s use of the eucharistic symbolism does not suggest that the ritual always had in real life the function Paul wished it to have. In many cases, nevertheless, it does make sense to ask questions like, how a given belief or practice contributes to the group’s functioning. Rituals can certainly become dysfunctional, but this does not mean that they may not also have a variety of social functions. It is hardly contestable that communal rituals often provide a kind of glue that keeps the social group together. They can do this, according to one recent explanation, by generating common knowledge. Moreover, collective rituals are particularly appropriate for demonstrating commitment.

Symbolist interpretations should not be strictly separated from the functionalist approaches. There is, however, a difference between the traditional functionalism focussing on social organization and more recent symbolist (or symbolist-culturalist)
approaches which search for meanings and systems of meanings.\textsuperscript{37} For scholars looking for meanings, symbols and rituals form a language-like system to be decoded by the interpreter. Victor Turner’s tripartite processual scheme (separation / liminality/reintergration) adapted from Arnold van Gennep\textsuperscript{38} has been especially influential in the study of early Christian ritual.\textsuperscript{39} This approach owes a great deal to the structuralist tradition as well.

An example of both functionalist and symbolist interpretation is Gerd Theissen’s rich discussion on ritual in \textit{A Theory of Early Christian Religion}.\textsuperscript{40} Similar to Meeks, Theissen sees the Eucharist as a rite of integration renewing the cohesion of the group. At the same time, in Theissen’s ‘semiotic’ interpretation, both baptism and the Eucharist form a ‘ritual sign language’ loaded with heavy symbolic meanings. In contrast to the ritual sacrifices of antiquity, Christian rituals contain ‘a consistent reduction of violence’. This reduction happens through a kind of sublimation. ‘The rites express in an unacknowledged way the hidden anti-social nature of human beings’.\textsuperscript{41} To put it in symbolic terms, according to Theissen, baptism is ‘a symbolic suicide’ and the Eucharist a ‘symbolic cannibalism’.

Theissen’s interpretation of baptism and the Eucharist is based partly on the explicit exegesis of Paul and other early Christian authors (e.g., Rom 6:3-5; 1 Cor 10:16; John 6:51) and partly on the assumption that there are ‘hidden’ antisocial or

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
  \bibitem{37} Bell, \textit{Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions}, p. 61.
  \bibitem{38} A. van Gennep, \textit{The Rites of Passage}, transl. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago, IL, 1960).
  \bibitem{40} Theissen, \textit{Theory}, pp. 119-160.
  \bibitem{41} Ibid., p. 135 (my emphasis).
\end{thebibliography}
‘taboo-crossing’ elements in early Christian rituals. Symbolist interpretations of ritual generally rely on combinations of participants’ explanations, observations of other culturally relevant information, and of some decoded meanings that the observer finds behind the explicit knowledge.

The symbolist approach must address at least two challenges. First, as symbolist anthropologists themselves have emphasised, religious symbols are multivocal and open-ended. Symbols can evoke many kinds of feelings and ideas for those who use them or perform religious rituals. No interpretation of symbols can eschew this property of symbolism. One may argue with Dan Sperber that ‘all keys to symbols are part of symbolism itself’. 42

The second challenge is that, if we assume that rituals convey profound meanings which are, at least partially, unacknowledged by and independent of the participants themselves, there must be some controlled way of revealing this implicit religious knowledge. As far as I can understand, Theissen’s interpretation draws on the psychoanalytic tradition in this regard. Recent cognitive approaches provide another alternative for looking for psychological or cognitive capacities that produce religious rituals.

Cognitive Models of Ritual

The cognitive science of religion seems a promising way to get testable hypotheses about the tacit knowledge behind people’s explicit motivations and interpretations of ritual practices. Thus, for example, Pascal Boyer argues that the explanation for the

cultural success of rituals is to be found in processes that are not transparent to practitioners.\textsuperscript{43} According to Boyer, rituals are compulsive for humans because they are ‘snares for thought’ that produce highly salient effects by activating special mechanisms in the mental basement. These mechanisms are systems for unseen danger, notions of counter-intuitive agents, and weak social concepts. Boyer argues that our social concepts are ‘weak’ because they cannot fully explain the complex aspects of social interaction and generate an aura of magic around social life, which then creates a need for explaining social changes by means of rituals.

More recently Boyer, in collaboration with Pierre Lienard, has developed his views into a more ambitious model for explaining both individual (pathological and normal) and collective ritualised behavior. According to Boyer and Lienard, ritualization is explained as an occasional by-product of specific human precaution systems including the detection of and reaction to inferred threats to fitness (distinct from systems of manifest danger).\textsuperscript{44} This kind of general theory is helpful in explaining why rituals are widespread in human cultures,\textsuperscript{45} but it does not provide ready-made tools for dealing with specific cultural situations and developments, such as the emergence of early Christianity. However, two recent theories of ritual seek to combine cultural and cognitive aspects in a manner that makes them a useful starting point for a cognitive analysis of early Christian rituals.

\textit{The modes of religiosity theory.} On the basis of his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse has advanced a theory of two modes of

\textsuperscript{43} Boyer, \textit{Religion Explained}, pp. 262-302.
\textsuperscript{45} See the discussion in Pyysiäinen, \textit{Magic, Miracles, and Religion}, pp. 135-146.
religion, imagistic and doctrinal. He suggests that religions focus around two ‘basins of attraction’ or tendencies toward two kinds of pattern of codification, transmission, cognitive processing and political organization. At the heart of the theory is the observation that low frequency, often painful or dramatic rituals, such as initiatory rites in many tribal cultures, are codified in what psychologists call ‘episodic memory’ and, in turn, frequently repeated, routinised rituals in ‘semantic memory’. (If you are not familiar with this distinction, just think of your daily way to work, on the one hand, normally codified in what psychologists call semantic memory – you do not necessarily remember any particular morning – and some especially memorable morning, on the other, which is codified in your episodic memory.) The key features of doctrinal and imagistic modes of religion are illustrated in Table 1.

What is essential here is that, according to Whitehouse, the types of cognitive processing influence people’s political and ideological systems. The social science approaches normally assume it is the other way around: political and ideological systems influence how people think and behave. I am not saying that it has to be an either/or situation. However, if it is both, cognitive processes must be taken into consideration in the analysis of early Christian rituals. Whitehouse’s theory focusses on memory and on the transmission of religious knowledge through rituals.

Ritual form theory by Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson concentrates on the formal structure of ritual behaviour. Emphasis on ritual form is not a novelty in

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ritual studies. Roy Rappaport, for example, has pointed out that ‘meanings and effects [of ritual] follow from ritual’s universal form’.  

Lawson and McCauley’s view is based on what they call the ‘competence approach’ inspired by Noam Chomsky’s linguistic theories. In analogy to Chomsky’s ‘universal grammar’, Lawson and McCauley argue that people have some form of intuitive competence to judge whether the ‘grammar’ of ritual is correct or incorrect. ‘With little, if any, explicit instruction, religious ritual participants are able to make judgments about various properties concerning both individual rituals and their ritual systems’.  

McCauley and Lawson’s theory is furthermore based on the observation that the action representation system of ritual follows the general pattern of any other action (vs. something just happening). The basic categories of action are agent, action, patient, and instrument: someone does something to someone by means of something. The difference is that in religious rituals, ‘culturally postulated superhuman agents’ (CPS-agents) are associated with one of these categories, for example, in baptism with agent and in the Eucharistic (at least eventually) with act / instrument. McCauley and Lawson divide religious rituals into two groups: 1) special agent rituals, and 2) special patient/instrument rituals, depending on which slot a CPS agent is associated with. A balanced ritual system includes rituals from both of these groups. The basic structure of the ritual form theory is illustrated in Figure 1.  

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51 See also Tamás Bíró’s discussion in this volume.
In addition to this structure, the model includes another factor, the structural depth of any given ritual. By this they mean the number of enabling rituals that need to be performed before the given ritual can be correctly performed. Just like any performance of actions presupposes certain earlier actions, rituals also normally presuppose the prior performance of another ritual action. A priest can baptise a child because he has been ordained by a bishop, the bishop can ordain the priest because he himself has received ordination, etc.

With their model, McCauley and Lawson believe that they can provide fairly accurate predictions about the properties of a ritual in any religious tradition. They claim that they can predict whether a ritual is reversible, whether the ritual is repeatable, and how much ‘sensory pageantry’ or sensory stimulation is associated with any given ritual. The model, for example, predicts that elevated levels of sensory arousal become associated with special agent rituals.

Originally, these two theories were developed independently and could be seen as competitors, but recent discussion and testing have tended to treat them as at least partially complementary. Serious criticisms have been raised against both and certainly new modifications of these theories will appear in the near future. It is not clear whether either ritual frequency or ritual form alone should take the causative role in the explanation of religious systems. Moreover, it is highly doubtful that any of these ritual theories could be used as a single grand narrative to explain the essence of (early

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Christian) religion.\footnote{Cf. Pyysiäinen, ‘Memories’.} They are, however, helpful in highlighting some significant dimensions of early Christian rituals that would otherwise be lost if we approached the rituals from the angle of the traditional ritual theories only.

Applications to Early Christian Rituals

The cognitive theories of ritual focus on three basic variants, ritual form (that is, whether a ritual is special agent or special instrument/patient ritual), sensory pageantry (that is, how much emotion, pain etc. is involved in a ritual), and ritual frequency (that is, how often a ritual performed to one patient). These three variants can be seen as the essential dimensions of cognitive ritual analysis.\footnote{Cf. also McCauley and Lawson, \textit{Bringing Ritual to Mind}.} As a conclusion, I would like to explore the potential ways in which the cognitive theories of ritual could be applied to the evolution of early Christian religion. I shall do this by discussing each variant separately.

\textit{Ritual form.} Lawson and McCauley’s ritual form theory may be helpful in conceptualizing the ritual innovation that occurred in the Jesus movement. As already noted, John’s baptism clearly contained ritually innovative elements as compared to other ritual ablutions in first-century Judaism, and Christian baptism can be seen, at least in terms of its formal structure, as a continuation of John’s ritual activity. Now, Lawson & McCauley’s theory helps us to see what exactly was new in John’s and early Christians’ baptism: it was a special agent ritual, in other words, its ritual form assumes God or his representative as an agent. Although we do not know in detail how John
performed his baptism, it seems clear enough that he was understood to be the agent of the immersion (cf. Mark 1:8: ‘I baptise/immerse you with [or in] water…’). It requires little imagination to assume that John was understood as a divine agent, a holy man or prophet, and that he was realizing this divine agency through his ritual. As far as we can tell, the rest of the first-century Jewish ritual system did not have special agent rituals (it is uncertain whether the circumcision of the male Israelite child would qualify as such, since God is not understood as the agent of circumcision; see Gen 17:10-14; Lev 12:3). Therefore, in the light of Lawson and McCauley’s model, the Jewish ritual system was generally an unbalanced system (it is crucial to note that this is only a formal description, not a theological judgement). Being unbalanced does not necessarily mean that the Jewish ritual system was unstable, but it left, as it were, the door open to splinter groups that could create special agent rituals. Another central early Christian ritual, the common meal, gradually developed into a special instrument ritual

56 For example, there is no conclusive evidence for whether John’s baptism was an act to be repeated or a single, unrepeateable rite. This may pose a problem for the assumption that John’s baptism was a special agent ritual, if we follow strictly McCauley and Lawson’s model. They argue that special agent rituals are unrepeateable (‘when the gods do things, they are done once and all’; ibid., pp. 30-31). I am inclined to think that John’s baptism was indeed once-in-a-lifetime ritual, simply because there is no evidence for the opposite and all the evidence we have in our sources can be explained by this assumption. This can, of course, be rejected as an argument e silentio. The main thrust of my argument is not, however, that John’s baptism was a special agent ritual – it hardly even qualifies for the strict definition of ‘religious ritual’ by McCauley and Lawson (ibid., pp. 13-16) – but that it evolved into such as Jesus’ disciples started to use it as an initiatory rite of their movement. For the issue of whether John’s baptism was performed only once per person, see Scobie, *John the Baptist*, pp. 91-92; Webb, *John the Baptizer*, pp. 183, 216; Taylor, *The Immerser*, pp. 69-72

57 Ibid., p. 50.

58 A man can at least theoretically circumcise himself. See Tamás Bíró’s ‘Is Judaism Boring? The Role of Symbols in “Imagistic” Jewish Movements in the Nineteenth Century’ (unpublished paper).

59 Ketola (‘Cognitive Approach’) would instead argue that first-century Judaism was a deflated balanced system, which developed rudimentary ritual innovations recognizable in Qumran and the Jesus movement’s meal practices. Ketola’s synthesis of the cognitive models, however, consists of two variants only: frequency and sensory pageantry.

60 See also McCauley and Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind*, p. 181.
in which a superhuman being was associated with the instruments of the ritual (see, e.g., 1 Cor 10:16). This means that early Christians were able to create a ritual system that included rituals of both major groups of Lawson and McCauley’s theory. This creation of a balanced ritual system should be taken as one reason for the survival of the early Christian movement.

*Sensory pageantry.* It is not clear how Lawson and McCauley’s prediction concerning sensory pageantry is fulfilled in early Christianity. According to the model, the introduction of a special agent ritual would increase sensory pageantry in a given ritual system. However, the rituals of first-century Judaism certainly did not lack emotional arousal; just think of such large and crowded festivals as Passover with thousands of lambs sacrificed in the temple of Jerusalem. At least outwardly, the ritual innovations of the Jesus movement did not add much in terms of sensory stimulation or pageantry. According to McCauley and Lawson, there is a difference between repeatable calendar feasts and other special patient rituals in which participants were ‘doing things to satisfy the CPS-agents time and time again’, on the one hand, and rituals which bring about ‘a superpermanent change in each specific ritual patient’, on the other. Early Christian baptism can be seen as a special agent ritual which was believed to produce such a superpermanent change.

In the New Testament, much is made of the reward of baptism and the superpermanent change baptism brings about. The baptised person is dedicated to the heavenly Jesus (Acts 8:16; 19:5; Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3). Baptism bestows the forgiveness

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61 For a criticism of McCauley and Lawson in this regard, see Ketola, ‘Cognitive Approach’.

62 Sanders estimates that 250,000 to 400,000 Palestinian Jews attended the festival (plus tens of thousands of pilgrims from the Diaspora) and approximately 30,000 lambs were slaughtered. E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63BCE-66CE* (London, 1992), pp. 127, 136.

of sins, freedom from the power of sin, sanctification, new life, gifts of the spirit, etc. (e.g., Rom 6:4,7; 1 Cor 6:11; 12:13). All this is seen to be in sharp contrast to the darkness in which Christians lived before their conversion (Rom 6:6; 1 Cor 6:9-11).

It is somewhat unclear, however, whether only special agent rituals can effect a permanent change. Circumcision can also be seen as an irreversible ritual, although probably not, as argued above, as a special agent ritual. On the other hand, initiations into the mystery cults, although providing closer analogies to Christian baptism than most Jewish rituals, could be repeated. Observations like these cast some doubt on McCauley and Lawson’s prediction that special agent rituals are non-repeated and that agentive properties determine the amount of sensory pageantry associated with rituals. Ilkka Pyysiäinen may be right in arguing that ‘it is not only the ritual form that provokes emotion… . The important thing seems to be whether the participant(s) experience an intimate relationship with the counterintuitive being(s).’ But even so, it is hardly contestable that the ritual form introduced by early Christians, that is, special agent ritual, supported the idea that ritual patients go through a superpermanent change. The claim that CPS-agents’ actions are more permanent than humans’ is probably quite intuitive. But what is also noticeable is that early Christian baptism, at least outwardly, involved a less amount of sensory pageantry than it was the case with many other Greco-Roman initiations. Perhaps one could suggest a kind of optimality principle for

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65 It would also be too generalizing to argue that all sacrificial practices in the ancient world were special patient rituals. A sacrificial meal, for example, could be conceived of as provided by, and therefore hosted by, the god. See Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, p. 78.


67 The most spectacular was, of course, *taurobolium*, but this comparison holds for many other mystery rites as well. See Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*. 
rituals that turn out (cross)culturally successful and become widespread. Rituals that evoke too strong emotional reactions or involve much physical pain cannot spread effectively. This would be in agreement with Whitehouse’s suggestion that the imagistic rituals prevail in small-scale and non-centralised communities (see Table 1). In contrast, rituals that contain a low level of arousal and evoke little or any emotional reactions are in danger of falling into oblivion unless supported by constant repetition and rehearsal.

**Ritual frequency.** It is widely assumed that rituals play an important role in the transmission of religious knowledge in general. But how should their place in the transmission and consolidation of early Christian traditions be defined? Scholars of early Christianity have not given much attention to this question.68

Most cognitive theorists agree that transmission can be achieved in two ways: either through frequent, routinised repetition or through intense emotional experience. Moreover, both Whitehouse and McCauley and Lawson argue that religious rituals/traditions tend to evolve around one of these attractor positions. In addition, Whitehouse suggests that the coalescing around one of the two codification systems (based on semantic or episodic memory) produce either doctrinal or imagistic modes of religiosity. Although Whitehouse states quite explicitly that the two modes are ‘alternative’,69 he also makes the case that *interaction* between the modes contributes to the survival of the doctrinal variant.70 It is this latter argument that is of special interest for the analysis of early Christianity.

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Early Christianity certainly included imagistic practices and promoted a low frequency ritual, baptism, which could generate long-lasting memories in ritual recipients. On the other hand, the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper early on became a frequently performed ritual (see 1 Cor 11:17-34), and the overall picture of early Christian religiosity is that it represents Whitehouse’s doctrinal mode. Basically, the transmission of Christian beliefs happened through regular gatherings, eucharistic meals, recitations of texts, sermons, etc., not through a dramatic initiatory rite. Repeated and explicit teaching about the supernatural change the members of the movement had undergone in baptism can be contrasted with ‘spontaneous exegetical reflection’, which, according to Whitehouse, characterises the imagistic mode of transmission. In the long run, this repetition brought about a tedium effect, which could produce more or less regular outbursts of imagistic practices and splinter groups. I have argued elsewhere that the Valentinian movement can be seen as an example of such imagistic splinter groups within late second- and early third-century Christianity. The Valentinians strongly intensified the early Christian initiation and modified it in the direction of the imagistic mode. It can, therefore, be argued that the interaction between doctrinal and imagistic practices within the early Christian movements was an important factor in relieving tedium and consolidating Christian beliefs and traditions.

Summary

I have above sought to demonstrate that the cognitive theories can contribute to the

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analysis of early Christian rituals at least in two ways. First, they can help in conceptualizing the ritual innovations that occurred in the Jesus movement, especially, the introduction of baptism as a special agent ritual. Secondly, the cognitive theories can bring into focus important aspects of ritual that the traditional approaches have often failed to take into account, such as the amount of sensory stimulation involved in a ritual action and the frequency of ritual behaviour. These aspects constrain and limit ritual systems in various significant ways. The cognitive theorists do not, however, agree on how these aspects should be organized into an overall theory and the predictions of their theories are partly competing. Some of the predictions do not hold in early Christianity. For example, the introduction of a special agent ritual does not seem to increase sensory pageantry associated with ritual activities. More theoretical work is needed for creating a practical synthesis of the cognitive theories of ritual to be applied in early Christianity. Consequently, my considerations here should be taken only as a first step toward a cognitively-informed examination of early Christian rituals.

The cognitive models approach rituals from a selectionist perspective – hence the words ‘survival’ and ‘consolidating’ in my presentation. They do not focus on origin, social function, or symbolic meanings of rituals as explanations of their spread and transmission. However, the cognitive models are not introduced to replace the more traditional approaches to early Christian rituals. In fact, I think the best result can be achieved by combining the traditional source-critical and functional approaches with the contributions from the cognitive science of religion. It is such a combined approach, taking into account both cognitive mechanisms and cultural environment,\textsuperscript{72} that has the prospect of producing answers to our initial question about the role of rituals in the emergence of early Christian religion.

\textsuperscript{72} Cf. the ‘explanatory pluralism’ advocated by Ilkka Pyysiäinen in this volume.
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