Terror

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Abstract and Keywords

This article examines ritual ordeals that inspire terror regardless of the participants' pre-existing beliefs. In such traditions, the relationship between belief and emotion is more or less the converse of that entailed by fears of supernatural punishment. Fear is a major part of the psychological processes that give rise to the gradual formation of mystical knowledge. Focusing on terrifying rituals has the advantage of picking out a generalizable feature of religion—not a feature of all religions, to be sure, but a "mode of religiosity" that is probably as ancient as our species and is still found in every corner of the globe. Given the shocking nature of the rituals in question, it is not unreasonable to refer to these practices as "rites of terror." Two strategies, broadly speaking, have been developed in an attempt to understand the nature and origins of rites of terror. The first strategy is sociological in orientation, while the second is a psychological one. This article also discusses the rituals, memories, and motivations associated with rites of terror.

Keywords: terror, religiosity, fear, rituals, rites of terror

IN a book about religion, what topics should a chapter on "terror" cover? Some readers might expect a discussion of religious "fanaticism" and its role in terrorist atrocities. Or perhaps such a chapter might focus on fears of damnation and other supernatural punishments. Or should it be an essay about religion as a response to (rather than a cause of) terror, building on the common notion that "there are no atheists in the trenches"? Such topics would no doubt be interesting to explore, but they concern, arguably, somewhat trivial or tangential connections between religion and emotion. If religious commitments inspire terrorism (and that would of course be a contentious claim),[1] then its targets are primarily located outside the religious coalition itself. If fear inspires sudden conversion, then all too often the circumstances of fear are said to originate in causes outside the belief system (e.g., "the trenches"). The notion of dogma as a cause of terror may seem to be more promising, insofar as it requires us to focus on the emotionality of religion itself. But this topic also belies some thorny problems. For in order to explain why supernatural sanctions inspire fear, we first have to explain why people believe in the efficacy of such

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sanctions. To live in dread of damnation, for instance, is to accept that it is possible to be damned; to fail to explain the belief is to fail to explain the emotion. Moreover, not all religions inspire terror by means of supernatural threats. If we allow ourselves to be distracted by that idea, we may lose sight of issues of general significance in the study of religion.

The principal focus of this chapter will be on ritual ordeals that inspire terror *regardless of the participants*' *preexisting beliefs*. Indeed, in such traditions, the relationship between belief and emotion is more or less the converse of that entailed by fears of supernatural punishment. It is not so much that one's beliefs inspire fear but that fear is a major part of the psychological processes that *give rise* to the gradual formation of mystical knowledge. Understanding the nature of such practices may, in a roundabout way, help us to answer the question of where (p. 260) religious beliefs come from, and why these sometimes (in turn) elicit anxieties. But focusing on terrifying rituals, at least as a starting point, also has the advantage of picking out a generalizable feature of religion—not a feature of all religions, to be sure, but a “mode of religiosity” that is probably as ancient as our species and is still found in every corner of the globe.[2] Given the shocking nature of the rituals in question, it is not unreasonable to refer to these practices as “rites of terror.”[3]

Although archeological evidence on ancient ritual practices is more often suggestive than conclusive, it seems likely that many of our earliest fully modern human ancestors experimented with terrifying ritual ordeals. In the famous caves at Tuc D'Audoubert, France, there are signs of ritual activities dating back up to fifteen thousand years, in which cohorts of adolescents appear to have undergone traumatic rituals that made full use of the dangers of the subterranean environment and the special acoustic and visual effects that those surroundings afforded.[4] Steven Mithen has recently pointed to the widespread occurrence of similarly frightening and often very violent rituals during long periods of prehistory in western Asia.[5] From the time of the classical civilizations, we have increasingly detailed evidence for such practices.[6] But of course it is from the contemporary ethnographic record that our most detailed studies of such rituals derive.

Traumatic ritual ordeals feature in all the world religions, at least as locally or regionally distinctive traditions rather than universal features. Examples might include the rituals of the *penitentes* of New Mexico or their Filipino or Mexican counterparts; Sufi performances of mortification; Opus Dei flagellations; or Buddhist and especially Zen monastic initiations. A particularly rich source of illustrations comes from anthropological research on small-scale traditional societies and their local cult practices. Aborigine groups, for instance, are famous for their practice of circumcision and subincision, involving the ritualized mutilation of boys' penises. But Aboriginal initiations traditionally involved a much wider range of tortures. For instance, Strehlow has described how Aranda boys were obliged to suffer sadistic episodes of head-biting, evulsions of their fingernails, showering with red-hot coals, and other agonizing procedures from which they were not permitted to flinch or take flight, on pain of death.[7] The caves of Aranda totemic groups were permanently spotted with the blood of generations of novices who had endeavored to paint

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sacred pictures with their mutilated fingers. Similarly grisly practices have been widely reported in studies of cult rituals in Amazonia, Melanesia, Africa, and elsewhere.[8]

Rites of Terror: Some Established Approaches

Two strategies, broadly speaking, have been developed in an attempt to understand the nature and origins of rites of terror. The first strategy is sociological in orientation, focusing mainly on the social consequences of participation (such as social (p. 261) integration, political domination, distinctive patterns of group interaction, the reproduction of cosmological knowledge, and so on). A strength of this approach is that it places rites of terror in a broader context, which is obviously necessary in order to understand them on their own terms but may also deliver important clues as the causes behind their recurrence cross-culturally and their persistence historically. De-contextualized descriptions of rites of terror have a somewhat lurid character, encouraging us to make sense of what is going on with reference to cultural schemas remote from the practices at hand (an error roundly deplored by social and cultural anthropologists as ethnocentricism). Relativism has its limitations, however. Some of the psychological implications of these ritual ordeals can be tacitly inferred on the basis of universal cognitive capacities that are little colored by local cultural knowledge: for instance, the obvious but important fact that these practices are terrifying, dangerous, and painful and (perhaps more contentiously) that they activate moral anxieties (for even if they are construed as being desirable or necessary for initiates to endure, they involve forms of cruelty that exact a toll on perpetrators as well as “victims”). But there are also many features of local sociocultural environments that do have important implications for our understanding of what is going on in rites of terror. The crunch question is *what* features of the context should really be taken into account, and *why*. As noted, it is reasonable to hope that at least some potentially generalizable features of the sociocultural context will help to *explain* what is going on. But, again, this is something to be demonstrated rather than assumed. I shall presently consider how some sociological approaches to the problem have tackled these issues.

The second major strategy is a psychological one: asking, for instance, about the motivations, conscious or otherwise, that induce people to participate in such traumatic and costly types of religious activities. A strength of this approach is that it takes us to the heart of problems of explanation. Unlike sociological theories, which generally have more to say about consequences and rationalizations than about causes and motives, psychological theories focus unashamedly on the primary unit of interest—human subjects and the mechanisms driving their behavior. But many of the psychological approaches currently available also have their limitations. Following a brief consideration of some prominent analyses of rites of terror, both sociological and psychological, I will set out the key features of a new theory that seeks to combine the strengths of both approaches: one that drives us more deeply in the ethnographic contexts at the same time that it identifies generalizable cognitive causes.

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To begin with the sociological approaches, these come in a dazzling array of varieties, but those with serious explanatory ambition (rather than primarily interpretive objectives) are broadly concerned with issues of political and cultural reproduction. Some of the most searching of these approaches may have become unfashionable, but that is no reason to overlook them (indeed, the problems they address have often been avoided rather than solved or, as is more commonly asserted, "transcended" by recent scholarship). A particularly promising theoretical tradition in anthropology, delivering significant insights into the ethnography of rites of terror, was instigated by Emile Durkheim and Arnold van Gennep, (p. 262) among others.[9] There were several distinct (though often closely interconnected) strands to this scholarship, of which two of the most influential may be described as "functionalist" and "symbolist." Although these perspectives were developed in a number of fruitful directions over the course of the twentieth century, some core features can be illustrated briefly by considering Edward Norbeck's work on ritual inversion in African religions and Maurice Bloch's theory of "rebounding violence," which is applicable to a wide range of rites.[10] Both approaches offer intriguing insights into the nature of violent ritual ordeals.

Norbeck observes that a great variety of traditional African rituals express themes of *conflict* between social groups and categories: between the sexes, between superiors and inferiors, between the relatives of bride and groom at weddings, between political coalitions, between people who hold grievances toward each other, and so on. In many cases, such rituals serve to exaggerate or caricature social tensions in ways that, although largely symbolic, are liable to spill over into actual violence. Conflict between the sexes might be expressed, for instance, in ritualized role reversal, whereby women would arm themselves with weapons, normally only handled by men, or use phallic objects to simulate male masturbation and sexual penetration. Such practices form part of a wider pattern of ritual transvestism in African religion. Conflict between people of different social rank might be expressed in ritual abuse of persons of high rank, for instance by means of symbolic regicide, commonly in traditional African states through the installation and symbolic (or actual) slaughter of a mock king.[11] It is also common in African societies for weddings to entail ritualized conflict between the relatives of the bride and groom, expressed in such practices as symbolic bride abduction, exchanging of insults among affines, and so on. Larger scale rituals, involving entire descent groups or other major coalitions, might involve mock battles and duels. And in many African societies it is common for outpourings of grievances to occur at sacrifices. In short, religious rituals are often occasions when social tensions are emphasized. Although some anthropologists, including Norbeck, have been tempted to interpret these practices as a form of emotional catharsis (a way of letting off steam and releasing pent-up frustration and aggression), a strong functionalist tradition in the study of such rituals has understood them to contribute to the stable reproduction of *society*, by publicly demonstrating enduring cohesion in the face of destabilizing conflicts. A classic example of this argument is to be found in Max Gluckman's interpretation of Swazi royal rituals in which he argued that structural tensions in the kingdom are symbolically expressed and then transcended through culminating ritual acts that emphasize the unity and loyalty of the king's subjects.[12]

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Although not primarily focused on terror, as such, it is clear that functionalist theories of ritualized conflict seek to explain the violent character of many ritual traditions, of which "rites of terror" might be considered a subset. After all, like other rituals of conflict, the kinds of initiation rites noted in the previous section all involve expressions of intergenerational tensions, and many emphasize gender opposition (often in an explicitly violent fashion), intergroup warfare, and other kinds of confrontational themes. A drawback with all functionalist arguments, (p. 263) however, is that they do not specify the mechanisms that would lead to the emergence of rituals that reinforce the status quo, in this case by caricaturing and then symbolically overcoming the tensions that threaten to disrupt it.

Maurice Bloch's theory of ritualized violence takes up a rather different strand of the Durkheimian legacy, in a way that explicitly eschews its functionalist aspects.[13] Bloch's approach is premised on the symbolist notion that images of the "other world" are more or less coded expressions of the transcendent quality of society. This notion, that institutions can have a transcendent quality (a kind of sacredness), lay at the heart of Durkheim's conception of the "elementary forms" of religion, which pivoted on a distinction between the sacred and the profane. In many ways, the sacred/profane dichotomy in Durkheim's writings was just another expression of his more pervasive distinction between the social and biological aspects of people. This is easiest to understand in a concrete way by thinking about the biological life cycle. In terms of their bodies, human beings go through irreversible phases of life: after being born, they grow and eventually reproduce, deteriorate, and die. These processes are biologically fixed, and all human beings are aware of the fact that they can't somehow "stop the clock" or turn it back. These biological realities constitute the essence of that which is profane or "worldly." Durkheim saw objects of religious worship, by contrast, partly as ways of grappling with a sense that social institutions transcend these biological limitations: they outlive us; we are socialized into them rather than creating them ourselves; they regulate our behavior. Religious ideas dwell on the notion of a state of permanent order and of transcendental power—something more powerful than the individual, something that is creative and is fundamentally unchanging. This, for Durkheim, was the essence of sacredness. But what these religious images refer to (or symbolize) is the unchanging and transcendent order of society itself. Building on these insights, Bloch argues that many religious rituals enact a dramatic conquest of the transcendental realm (Durkheim's category of the "sacred") over this world (the "profane"). Using examples from a great range of traditional religions across several continents, Bloch makes a strong case for the view that the ritual process begins by constructing a dramatic bifurcation of worldly vitality (images of biological processes) and their typically violent annihilation by agents of the sacred realm (images of the spiritual or sacred realm symbolizing the abiding authority of society). Thus, the rites of initiation briefly described earlier (and thousands of others like them) generally begin with a violent assault on the bodies of novices, symbolizing the overwhelming power and transcendence of the social/sacred realm over earthly vitality.

Bloch's account of the ritual process, however, is rather more complex (and more interesting) than that. If the symbolic destruction of the flesh constitutes a victory of sacred over profane (and thus of social reproduction over the impermanence of biological

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process), then rituals that end at this point would abandon their patients to the realms of the sacred. This, of course, is the purpose of the funeral, and perhaps of some millenarian rituals, but most rituals go further: far from delivering us into the transcendental domain (the afterlife or some heaven on earth), they must bring us back into "this world" somehow invigorated by the (p. 264) powers we have absorbed. In most traditional religions around the world, ritualized "reentry" into this world is expressed as a violent conquest—an act of "rebounding violence," to use Bloch's apposite phrase. In the case of initiations, novices are symbolically brought back from the dead in the guise of heroic conquerors (warriors, hunters, and the like). Whereas the ritual process began with the destruction of their bodies, it ends with a reclaiming of those bodies, but in a way that emphasizes the enhanced spiritual/sacred power of their owners. We see similar symbolism in many royal rituals, ordinations, and other rites that are intended to imbue their patients with worldly authority. In Bloch's scheme, violence becomes an indispensable feature of the ritual process in general.

Unlike functionalist approaches to "rites of terror" Bloch's theory does not presuppose some mechanism of self-preservation at the level of society itself. The challenge is not to explain how the social order established rituals to maintain its stability but rather to explain how people come to imagine society as a transcendent force ("the gods" or "the ancestors") whose powers can be tapped in the reproduction of worldly authority. For the purposes of this discussion, the argument is interesting, in that it promises to explain the extremely violent character of many rituals but does not provide an entirely satisfactory explanation of the role of terror. Rituals could involve *symbolic* violence, thereby meeting the expectations of the "rebounding violence" theory, without requiring participants to endure *real* acts of violence. In most initiation rites, for instance, not only are novices obliged to endure genuine physical assault but also the agonies and horrors of their predicament are typically maximized and exacerbated.

Psychological approaches to the subject tackle the issue of terror more directly, by drawing analogies between ritual torture and overt acts of terrorism. In a classic study of extremely violent male initiations in New Guinea, Donald Tuzin identifies striking parallels between the initiator–novice relationship and way hostages in airplane hijackings and similar scenarios sometimes come to feel about their captors.[14] It has long been recognized by social psychologists that, following their release, hostages are liable to emphasize acts of compassion on the part of their captors and even to defend their actions in a systematic way (in extreme cases, converting to their cause).[15] Tuzin observes that the traumatic ordeals of initiation are punctuated by acts of kindness on the part of initiators, apparently inspiring feelings of "love," "gratitude," and "deep identification."[16] This process of identification with the oppressor may, Tuzin suggests, play a key role in the reproduction of the rituals. Novices may be "converted" to the cause of the ritual experts and motivated to assume the role of initiators themselves, when their time arrives.

The cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer more recently notes strong parallels between the ritual groupings formed through rites of terror and other kinds of coalitions.[17] He observes that the most violent rituals tend to be associated with groups that face exception-

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ally acute dangers (e.g., on the battlefield or hunting grounds) and where the temptation to abandon one's fellows is in consequence very considerable. In selecting members for coalitions of this sort, one intuitively seeks reassurance that (p. 265) recruits will prove trustworthy when the going gets tough. An obvious way to put prospective recruits to the test is to require them to make a massive sacrifice in advance and see if they will stand firm. According to Boyer, this is the main purpose of rites of terror: it is a way of testing the loyalty of members of endangered coalitions in circumstances where the costs of failure are not too damaging to the group.

An advantage of these sorts of psychological theories is that they seem to explain the emphasis on terror, rather than merely on violence per se, in certain rituals. As such, these approaches potentially complement (rather than contradict or replace) sociological ones. But they also have their limitations, perhaps the most serious of which stem from the fact that they are based on analogies with rather distant kinds of social situations. Initiation rites have some similarities with acts of terrorism in which hostages are taken, but there are also dangers in carrying the analogy too far. Terrorists do not take hostages with the aim of spiritually and physically transforming them or transmitting a set of secret mystical revelations. Likewise, the ritual groupings formed through initiations are not quite the same as other kinds of endangered coalitions where there is a need to put potential recruits to the test. Consider the situation confronted by a gang of youths or a crime ring that faces constant threat from its rivals, from the police, and perhaps from other locally powerful organizations. In such coalitions, potential recruits could be required to undergo “tests” of a kind that might well be reminiscent of initiation rituals. But there are also crucial differences: recruits would typically have the option to “keep their noses clean” rather than to get involved with gangs or the mob. There is, at least in principle, an assumption of voluntary involvement, and this is crucial to the intuitive effectiveness of any test new recruits may be required to pass. In the case of most initiation rites (indeed, all those mentioned earlier), there is no such voluntarism, even in principle. It is axiomatic that those undergoing initiation have no choice other than to comply and indeed would be killed if they attempted to resist or run away. The price of defection is invariably much higher than the price of compliance, and so such ordeals cannot be construed by any stretch of the imagination as genuine tests of loyalty.

Existing attempts to makes sense of rites of terror may well capture some salient elements of what is happening, in both sociological and psychological terms but also leave a lot to be explained. Sociological approaches have explored some general features of the symbolic character and institutional consequences of violent rituals, and a major point in their favor is that they encompass a wide range of ritual phenomena. Nevertheless, such approaches do not satisfactorily explain why symbolic violence so often turns into *actual* violence. Psychological approaches have begun to penetrate possible causes of the terrifying character of certain violent rituals. In doing so, however, they have tended to focus more heavily on initiations than on other kinds of religious phenomena and have done so in ways that underestimate some features that might make religious initiations different from other forms of corporate recruitment. In the next section, I consider a new approach

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that attempts to combine a number of cognitive and sociopolitical features of these rituals, while trying also to draw on some of the strengths of existing theories.

(p. 266) Rites of Terror: Ritual, Memory, and Motivation

To understand why a significant class of religious rituals elicits strong, negatively valenced emotion—typically "terror"—we first need to appreciate some basic features of ritual *in general*. What makes ritualized actions different from other kinds of behaviors is the fact that the choreography and speech is stipulated in advance, not by the performer him- or herself but by some other agent (often of unknown origin) for reasons that are not capable of being inferred intuitively. Rituals are actions for which almost any rationale could in principle be given (even if in practice the exegetical meanings are supplied by religious authorities). In nonritual actions, by contrast, we presume that the intentional system driving the performance is firmly located inside the actor: even if the actions are somewhat fixed by convention, rather than being the spontaneous creations of those carrying them out, we know that the actor is making each move according to means-end calculations. As soon as such calculations cease to be relevant—that is, as soon as we start to suspect that the action is selected purely for reasons of stipulation rather than because of the actor-driven goals and decisions—then the behavior appears progressively ritualized. Humphrey and Laidlaw, who pioneered this line of argument, describe ritual actions as lacking "intrinsic intentional meaning."[18] Thanks to recent breakthroughs in those fields of cognitive science that focus on the way humans try to "read" the intentions of those around them, we are now able to formulate increasingly precise psychological theories of (at least this aspect of) ritualized behavior.

Experimental psychologists have shown that cognitively normal adults possess a distinctive repertoire of highly sophisticated mechanisms for making sense of other people's behaviors. These mechanisms, collectively referred to as "theory of mind" (TOM),[19] develop during childhood according to a fixed series of stages, regardless of cultural differences. Infants and toddlers all around the world rapidly come to appreciate that animate beings are driven by invisible states (intentions) rather than having to be acted on by external forces (as would be the case with all inanimate objects, like natural kinds and artifacts). Only around age three or four, however, do children begin to realize that these intentions can be based on erroneous premises. Up to this point in development, children assume that whatever they know about the state of the world is also known to everyone else, even if many of the people around them couldn't possibly have seen or heard the same things that they have witnessed. But four-year-olds realize that other people are not quite so omniscient: they can be mistaken about things and, perhaps more important, they can be tricked or misled. Although this capacity, sometimes described as "first-order TOM," develops quite automatically in most young children, one of the defining features of autism is the failure of such mechanisms to become properly established (in people with this condition, all further development of TOM (p. 267) likewise seems to be arrested).[20] Around

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middle childhood, a major new development occurs: children now begin to realize that other people are constantly playing the mind-reading game and that their actions are therefore often selected with the aim of communicating and concealing information. This development, sometimes called "second-order TOM," marks the maturation of an extremely sophisticated intention-reading system (or set of systems) that continues to operate throughout adulthood. Every time adults observe other people doing something, they automatically (if largely unconsciously) interpret the intentional states of the actor, with greater or less degrees of accuracy. And this is also what makes ritualized behavior possible.

Ritual actions, like any other actions, trigger our TOM mechanisms. But then we immediately run into problems. The actions carried out in rituals are not driven by the actors' intentions in any normal way. When people put on special clothes (not any clothes, but something very deliberately stipulated) and start carrying out odd procedures (not any procedures, but specifically prescribed ones in a predetermined order) that have no obvious technical motivations, we find that our TOM capacities cannot deliver satisfactory explanations for what is happening. We might start to speculate that, even if the present actor is not the author of this peculiar behavior, there must be an intelligent agent at the root of it. Perhaps the previous generation, who taught us to behave in this way, or the generation before them? Such a search for meaning is a search for ritual exegesis, but its outcomes are uncertain and problematic. As Bloch has recently observed:

> Exegesis, that is the search for original intentionality, is in itself perfectly reasonable, and although frustrating, almost inevitable. After all, we are dealing with human minds, that is, with animals whose minds are characterized by an intentionality-seeking device that is normally exercised ceaselessly, one might almost say obsessively, sometimes consciously but often unconsciously, and that enables them to read the minds of others and thus coordinate their behavior with them. But in a ritual, these poor little animals, amongst them poor little anthropologists, appear to be faced with an impossible situation because the search for intentionality leads them ever further back, to ever more remote authorities, but without ever settling anywhere with any finality.[21]

There are two major ways this search for meaning unfolds.[22] One possibility is that the rituals become so habituated, through frequent repetition, that they no longer trigger TOM mechanisms to any significant extent. Performative competence becomes largely a matter of procedural fluency at an unconscious level, and once we find that we no longer need to reflect explicitly on the question of *how* to perform the rituals, there will be a corresponding reduction in our efforts to reflect on *why* we perform them. In the case of many such actions, such as the Roman Catholic practice of crossing oneself, exegetical concerns simply evaporate, and hardly anyone knows (or cares) any more what the actions mean. In other cases, religious authorities step in and tell us how to interpret the rituals. Since their pronouncements are not, by and large, challenged by competing interpretations (based on independent reflection), and to the extent that the authoritative exegesis (p. 268) is effectively policed and regulated (via the monitoring functions of ecclesi-

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astic hierarchies and the use of routinized sermonizing), the official version of what the rituals mean is likely to stick. But we need not concern ourselves here with the details of such forms of religious transmission. Our present interest is in rites of terror. So what happens to our TOM mechanisms when ritual experiences are really shocking and upsetting?

The short answer to this question is that our TOM mechanisms go into overdrive. And to understand why, we also need to understand how our memory systems respond to traumatic situations. A very substantial body of psychological research, over an appreciable period of time, has revealed that elevated arousal, coupled with shocks to the cognitive system (triggered by events that do not conform to expectations), give rise to special kinds of long-lasting memories, commonly referred to as "episodic" memories.[23] What is special about this kind of remembering is that it enduringly encodes details of the unique event or episode, identifying it as a distinct experience in space and time, in contrast with the kinds of memories that pertain to bits and pieces of information we have picked up without ever being able to recall when or where we first learned them. Recollections that are particularly detailed and haunting are sometimes referred to as "flashbulb memories,"[24] because they seem to be etched in our minds with photograph-like vividness, encoding all kinds of details in our perceptual systems (visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, and so on). One of the key features of flashbulb memory, and of episodic memory more generally, is that it is an explicit system, delivering outputs that are accessible to conscious inspection and report. This also means that the things we remember as distinctive episodes are liable to become a focus for conscious rumination, often over many years or even a lifetime. If we think of life-changing events in general, it is hardly surprising that they give rise to intermittent rumination, particularly in periods of stress. When we are very unhappy with our lives, for instance, we may be prone to "what if" kinds of thoughts, focused on junction points in our lives when we might have made different choices "if only … " or when things might have happened slightly differently. But all of this pales into insignificance when we consider the long-term effects of participation in life-changing *rituals*. Why? Because of all the *problems* ritualization presents to our TOM mechanisms.

Ritualization, uniquely among all other kinds of human behavior, both activates and frustrates our TOM mechanisms. In the case of rituals that are frequently repeated and elicit relatively low levels of arousal, the potential frustration is offset by habituation, which effectively suppresses the need for exegetical interpretation, as noted. But high-arousal rituals, rarely enacted, trigger lasting episodic recall (often exhibiting all the classic features of "flashbulb memory") that thrusts itself on our conscious awareness, particularly in religious traditions that contrive continually to remind us of the traumas we have had to endure. In initiation cults, for instance, reminders of the tortures and privations of novices are always amply present in the physical and social environment, and the agonies of flagellants, ascetics, and visionaries are perpetually triggered by religious discourse and iconography. The wounds, so to speak, are forever being "reopened" in consciousness, (p. 269) or in semiconscious modalities. Consequently, there is no rest for our TOM mechanisms, and we are condemned to an endless search for interpretative meaning. I have argued at length elsewhere that exegesis based on internal rumination of this kind

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results in highly motivating religious ideologies, typically idiosyncratic and hard to convey in words but nevertheless deeply implicated in the formation of attitudes and beliefs. One of the key psychological features of this sort of exegetical knowledge is analogical thinking, which uses both affect and semantic structure to generate connections between the possible intentional meanings of rituals and other domains of knowledge and understanding. In unraveling the processes involved, we have not only ethnographic evidence to draw on but also some experimental evidence.[25]

Note, however, that this enriches rather than displaces the arguments surveyed in the preceding section. For instance, it is certainly the case that many rituals express themes of conflict, and functionalist analyses of this phenomenon have raised some important issues. Gluckman and Norbeck, as noted, have observed that the expression of social tensions in a ritualized fashion provides a way of managing emotional (and perhaps also social structural) challenges, without having to deal with a backlash of recriminations from aggrieved parties. The explanation for this lies precisely in the cognitive properties outlined here: it is in the nature of rituals that the persons performing them are not (at least not wholly) the intentional agents behind it all. They are perceived to be acting in a way that absolves them of responsibility, since they are not really the authors of their actions. This line of argument also supports the central insights of the symbolist school. Authority is indeed reproduced and distributed through ritual action, but this is mainly because ritualization confounds our TOM mechanisms and so continually refers us back to prior intentionality, construed variously as "the ancestors," "tradition," or "the gods." Bloch describes this as the essence of deference: when people assert that a ritual must be performed in this or that particular way, even though it is hard to say why, "they are surely telling us that what they are doing, saying, singing, is above all *deferring*."[26] Yet these potentialities are part and parcel of all kinds of ritualized behavior and do not account specifically for rites of terror.

To understand why some rituals are terrifying, we need to appreciate their motivational consequences. Patterns of experimentation with ritualized behavior that drive us in the direction of high-arousal, low-frequency performances have major consequences for our motivational systems and ultimately, therefore, for the transmission of ritual traditions over time. The rich and revelatory exegesis that develops in the wake of ritual traumas has profound and enduring effects on our levels of religious commitment, especially when compared with the effects of exegetical transmission based on verbal testimony. At the core of this process is the activation of episodic memory, which ensures the persistence of problems of exegetical meaning in the consciousness of ritual participants. But episodic memory for rites of terror has other consequences, too. It ensures that participants will always recall who else was present during a given ritual ordeal, thereby establishing enduring and cohesive bonds between those who went through the experience (p. 270) together.[27] This, in turn, provides a powerful foundation for coalitional thinking, as noted by Boyer (see above). And this line of argument is also compliant with Tuzin's observation that violent and frightening initiations may encourage novices to identify with their ritual persecutors. The point would be *not* that these earlier theories are wrong but that they

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are not sufficient in themselves to uncover the dynamics that drive the transmission of rites of terror over time.

Conclusions

"Rites of terror" are an ancient and cross-culturally recurrent feature of religion primarily because they trigger powerful motivational states through the activation of episodic memory and "theory of mind" mechanisms. The significance of lasting episodic memories for ritualized ordeals is that they encourage people to dwell on the possible *meanings* of their experiences and so to construct elaborate cosmological knowledge based on processes of "spontaneous exegetical reflection." Such knowledge, resulting from internal processes of explicit rumination, hardens into elaborate (if largely esoteric and mystical) cosmology. Such knowledge forms the core of the belief systems of ritual experts and leads to the overriding conviction that others must acquire the knowledge in their turn, via the same costly processes of revelation. This conclusion would seem to be supported by the ethnographic record, and in particular by a number of recent attempts to evaluate the model presented here against a wide range of cases.[28] Assuming the approach continues to withstand empirical scrutiny and testing, where is this likely to leave us in relation to more established hypotheses, both sociological and psychological?

In some respects, Durkheim's original characterization of the "elementary forms" of religion still seems remarkably penetrating. Durkheim took seriously the role of emotional arousal in Aboriginal ritual, for instance, producing what he called "collective effervescence"—the affective intensity of group identity and cohesion. Moreover, he was among the first to appreciate the identity-conferring aspects of imagistic ritual, expressed most famously in his symbolist interpretation of Aboriginal totemism:

> The totem … expresses and symbolizes two different sorts of things. In the first place, it is the outward and visible form of what we have called the totemic principle of god. But it is also the symbol of a determined society or clan … so if it is at once the symbol of god and of the society, is that not because the god and the society are only one?[29]

Nevertheless, a limitation of Durkheim's argument, and with subsequent functionalist and symbolist interpretations more generally, was that the cognitive or conceptual dimensions of identity-conferring ritual cannot be reduced to simplistic forms of correspondence or isomorphy between religious classificatory schemes (p. 271) and the constitution of social organization or worldly authority. Such approaches bypass the most compelling aspects of the imagistic mode of religiosity, especially the traumatic and revelatory nature of ritual, and consequently fail to integrate these into a theory of group formation. The focal imagery of Aboriginal ritual is not a set of "emblems" or "flags" but a repertoire of loosely associated concrete metaphors, generated through long-term reflection on the meanings of emotionally haunting ritual experiences.

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This is also what makes “rites of terror” different from the experience of being taken hostage by terrorists or being recruited by the mob. After hostages are released, or after people have been violently inducted into a criminal gang, they are certainly likely to remember their ordeals for a long time to come (in fact will probably take these memories to the grave). They may even reflect to some extent on what might have been, had not certain chance events occurred, or key decisions been taken, at various points leading up to the events in question. But when traumatic experiences are heavily ritualized, this kind of reflection becomes very much more complex and fertile. Ritual is, after all, a somewhat vexing phenomenon in that it refuses to yield simple and obvious meanings. The place of intentionality and technical motivation remains forever elusive—a problem that most of the time is easy enough to overlook. But when rituals are also deeply shocking, leaving scars in memory that can never completely heal, we are condemned not only to reflect on what happened but also to repeat it, for the benefit (or perhaps to the detriment) of succeeding generations.

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(2.) See Harvey Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult: Religious Experience and Innovation in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2004).

(3.) For a fuller justification of this term, see Harvey Whitehouse, “Rites of Terror: Emotion, Metaphor, and Memory in Melanesian Initiation Cults,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, n.s., 4 (1996): 703–15.

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(13.) Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*.

(14.) Donald F. Tuzin, *The Voice of the Tambaran: Truth and Illusion in Ilahita Arapesh Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

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(17.) Pascal Boyer, "A Reductionistic Model of Distinct Modes of Religious Transmission," in *Mind and Religion: Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity*, edited by Harvey Whitehouse and Robert N. McCauley (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2005), 3–29.

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(20.) See Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

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(22.) My own views on this matter contrast somewhat with Bloch's. See Whitehouse and Laidlaw, *Ritual and Memory*.

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(23.) For an authoritative overview, see Alan Baddeley, *Human Memory: Theory and Practice*, rev. ed. (Hove, England: Psychology Press, 1997).

(24.) See Martin Conway, *Flashbulb Memories* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1995).

(25.) See, for instance, Fredrik Barth's classic ethnographic research: *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), and *Cosmologies in the Making: A Generative Approach to Cultural Variation in Inner New Guinea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For some experimental evidence, see Rebekah Richert, Harvey Whitehouse, and Emma Stewart, “Memory and Analogical Thinking in High-Arousal Rituals,” in Whitehouse and McCauley, *Mind and Religion*,127–45.

(26.) Bloch, “Ritual and Deference,” 65.

(27.) See Harvey Whitehouse, “Memorable Religions: Transmission, Codification, and Change in Divergent Melanesian Contexts,” *Man*, n.s., 27 (1992): 777–97.

(28.) A particularly significant body of wider ethnographic, historiographical, and archaeological evidence is assembled in the following collections of essays: Whitehouse and Laidlaw, *Ritual and Memory*; Whitehouse and Martin, *Theorizing Religions Past*; Luther H. Martin and Harvey Whitehouse, *History, Memory, and Cognition*, special issue, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 31 (2005): 195–200.

(29.) Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 206.

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