

## ON LEARNING RELIGION: AN INTRODUCTION

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### **Religion, Recollection and Learning**

A Biblical text (*Acts of the Apostles*, 8: 31–32) tells us that immediately after Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost inspired Jesus' disciples to spread the good news, Philip, one of the apostles, saw the eunuch of the queen of the Ethiopians reading the Book of Isaiah. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' asked Philip. 'How can I, unless someone instructs me?' replied the eunuch. Then Philip carefully read the text with him and explained that what they were reading was in fact the announcement of the coming of Jesus. The eunuch not only understood then what he had been reading (*and told*), but also asked to be baptized with water. Something somewhat similar happened two thousand years later when a Russian woman we met told us she used to read the Bible a lot, but had not understood it. She only understood it when her boyfriend, a Jehovah's Witness, explained the meaning of the texts to her. Not only did she then 'understand' the Bible, but she also converted from the Orthodox Church to the Jehovah's Witnesses' religion.

These relatively simple occurrences could exemplify some of the aspects we wanted to explore when in September 2005, under the aegis of the Wennergen Foundation for Anthropological Research, we organized a symposium, rather intriguingly called 'learning religion', at the Institute of Social Sciences, Lisbon. We have here a man and a woman who respectively celebrate a religious action routinely (reading a holy text without 'understanding' it) and an instructor who fills

this ritual action with ‘meaning’, which then leads to their finally experiencing a transformation we would normally refer to as ‘conversion’. Of course both the eunuch and the Russian woman had already had some instruction, otherwise they would not have spent their time reading such solemn texts. Yet, the experience of suddenly ‘understanding’ something when someone else brings an explanation from outside and forces a new reading of one’s routine is not only a characteristic of conversion narratives, but in many ways it may be essential to religion itself.

Already in the first century BC, the Roman thinker Cicero in his *De Natura Deorum* (II: 72) had established a solid distinction between those who conducted a religious ritual routinely just because they were asked or instructed to do so but paid no attention to it (Cicero called them ‘superstitious’, a word whose meaning has changed enormously) and those who followed it attentively and consciously. These were called ‘religious’ – or so Cicero claimed – because they did what in Latin was called *relego*: to do something in full consciousness (‘observing’ a cult, as the English has it), a concept sometimes translated as ‘re-reading’ and sometimes, probably more accurately, as ‘recollecting’.<sup>1</sup> For Cicero, a religious person was one who not only performed a rite, but also conducted it carefully. As some contemporary colleagues would put it, ‘orthopraxis’ is for many religious people more important than orthodoxy, but it must be taken into account that Cicero’s suggestion was that this ‘orthopraxis’ should not become mechanical but remain conscious, otherwise it would then be mere *superstition*. So one had to conduct rites with full attention and with full intention.

Some readers could disagree and insist that the two cases in point do not exemplify Cicero’s *relego* but rather give it a ‘serendipitous’ twist: it is when re-reading the texts with the (should we say misleading?) help from Philip or a boyfriend that our protagonists suddenly ‘understood’ what they had been reading and entered a different religion to that in which they had been socialized. However, if we follow Emile Benveniste (1969), who for many years has provided the most reliable hermeneutic of these Ciceronian concepts, the disagreement would be ironed out. For him, the idea that *relego* implied a new rendering of an old practice (be it a rite or a text) was implicit in the concept. He translated *relego* by the obsolete French verb *recollecter* and glossed it as ‘going back to a previous synthesis in order to recompose it’ (Benveniste 1969, Vol. 2: 271; our translation). A religious person should constantly read the foundations of his or her beliefs and apply them to new situations, always revisiting, like a chameleon, the trodden path with renewed intent to move forward. The basic foundations of a religious system may be very solid, but they can be ‘observed’ in very different ways by different actors or even by the same actor at dif-

ferent times, as Clifford Geertz proved in his classic comparison of two Muslim settings (Geertz 1971). Of course, the fact that *relego* implied some re-reading does not solve the problem of conversion (which in any case is not the problem this volume addresses), but we think that in many cases even conversion could be more fruitfully seen as a process of recollection and reinterpretation of one's past than as a biographical 'rupture'.

As is well known, Cicero's etymological exploration (probably whimsical) of 'religion' was later contested by Christian apologetics, most notably Lactantius (third century) and later Augustine (fourth century), for whom the Latin word *religio* stemmed (probably whimsically too) from the verb *relio* (to re-bind), because religion means binding someone to the divinity (for further reading on these etymologies, see Meslin 1988: 24–42; Smith 1998: 269–70). This set a characteristically theological (Christian) way of thinking about religion that has been a problem not only for theologians, but also for historians of religion, anthropologists and other social scientists (Asad 1993). Indeed we cannot reduce religion to inner devotion (although this should not be neglected either) and, to our understanding, Cicero's exploration seems much more descriptive and open to other religions than Lactantius' or Augustine's inner re-binding. In any case, the most interesting thing about these two etymologies may be that they both coincide on one thing: the reiterative aspect of religion. Whether we recollect or we re-bind, whether the etymology of religion is *relego* or *religio*, we are fundamentally talking about some kind of repetitive action (Latour 2002). No matter how it is defined, religion has to do with reiteration: of words, actions, intentions or memories. How it repeats and replicates itself over time and space is what we ethnographers are here to find out.

However, finding out about this is not an obvious matter either at the theoretical or methodological level. In many ways this volume, just as the 2005 Lisbon conference on which it is based, is the direct outcome of this difficulty and the concomitant need to start clearing up the path. Both of us have done fieldwork and have written about roughly the same area (coastal Guinea), enveloped in the same environment marked by strong secrecy, legacies of iconoclastic Muslim movements and socialist 'campaigns of demystification' and by the pervading presence of spiritual agencies despite the absence of formal institutions of religious learning (Berliner 2005b, 2005c; Sarró 2002, 2007b). It may not come as a surprise that Guinea also offered a field site for Christian Højbjerg, who has also worked on transmission of religious knowledge and has developed a theory of the 'robustness' of religious notions to explain the tenacity of religious representations even when religious institutions are officially banned (Højbjerg

2002b), as well as for Michael McGovern, author of a PhD dissertation on the impact of anti-ritualist policies in the making of contemporary Guinean subjectivities (McGovern 2004). Richard Fardon (1990) once wrote that anthropological paradigms are often inscribed in regional areas. Without claiming to have invented a new paradigm in Guinea, there is no doubt that the specific religious history in this country led us to think through issues of learning and transmission in religion and to discover, alas, that despite anthropologists' long-standing interest in religion, we still lacked the methodological tools to start tackling the topic of its learning. We thought that organizing a conference with some of the best specialists in religious knowledge would be a good way to make a start. It was a good idea.

Anthropologists have defined 'religion' in many ways, and although we do not want to convert this introductory chapter into a list of definitions, it may be useful to recollect some trends that have accompanied our discipline since the nineteenth century. Edward Tylor's classic and succinct definition of religion as 'belief in spiritual beings' has been a powerful one and although today it may sound slightly too obvious, we must keep in mind that in its days it was meant as a provocation against a legion of scholars who argued that unless you had a temple, a holy scripture, a priestly class and (only) one high god, you could not really claim you had 'religion' (Tylor 1903 [1871], Vol. 1: 424; for a contextualization of Tylor's definition, see Pals 1996: 16–29 and Stringer 1999). Despite its own inner problems (what exactly is a 'belief'? what kind of being is a 'spiritual' one?), Tylor's definition, together with its concomitant concepts of 'animism' and 'intellectualism' proved to be sufficiently thought-provoking tools for anthropology. Not only did they give rise to much debate and research about what makes religion something different from any other human activity, but in fact today they are also coming back and articulating fresh research on why and how it is possible for people to believe in non-sensorial entities that, for the lack of a better word, we might as well call 'spiritual', although 'supernatural' would probably be a more neutral term (for contemporary cognitive approaches to 'animism', see Guthrie 1993, Boyer 1996, and much of the cognitive approaches to religion reviewed in the next section).

Another angle that has proved quite consistent is one that views religion as a sentiment of dependence from – or of belonging to – a superior force. This idea was very dear to German Protestant thinkers, from Schleiermacher (1994 [1799]) to the founders of modern comparative history of religions such as Friedrich Max Müller (1878) and a little later Rudolf Otto (1956 [1918]), but it had its clearly non-religious variant in the Durkheimian line of analysis (Durkheim 1995 [1912]). The approach is still being fruitfully explored by contempo-

rary authors who see religion as, among other things, a system of subordination to both superhuman entities and an encompassing ideological system (for a paradigmatic example, see Bloch 1992). Symbolic anthropology of the 1960s, which was probably more strongly influenced by Weber than Durkheim, gave rise to new definitions of religion, such as that of Clifford Geertz (1969; see his recent reappraisal in Geertz 2005). That religion was a system of symbols through which people constructed a meaningful world also had its imprint on the history of religions, especially in the anthropologically-oriented version of Jonathan Z. Smith and his followers, a school that has learnt to use anthropology in very enriching ways (Smith 1976, 1989, 2002) and has in turn given feedback to anthropological analyses of ritual and religion (see, for example, Ray 2000).<sup>2</sup> There are undoubtedly many other approaches that should be taken into account. We might as well decide that the exercise of trying to define 'religion' is futile and should be given up, as seem inclined Talal Asad (1983), William Arnal (Arnal 2000) and other contemporary scholars of religion. There are indeed many things one can say about religion. One can even deny its existence as a 'thing' to be studied<sup>3</sup> or, more intriguingly, that it exists for other people, as in the case of an Orthodox Christian who said he could not discuss religion with Protestants because, according to him, they did *not* have religion (Sarró 2007a). But one thing we definitely cannot do is claim that whatever it is that we, or the people we have mentioned, call 'religion' (be it their inner convictions or their social institutions) is something that just came 'out of the blue'. People live in society, and it is in society they are socialized and learn to be grown-ups – *religious* grown-ups, sometimes.

There is little doubt then that no matter how well- or ill-defined they are, religious dynamics have been a profusely explored area in the history of anthropology. Religion, beliefs and rituals have been a cherished area of anthropological analysis and reflection even since the days of Frazer's and Tylor's insistence on the explanatory role of beliefs; ever since Durkheim's seminal influence on British functionalism and French structuralism when he showed that religion is fundamental in creating a sense of coherence and belonging to a social group; ever since Evans-Pritchard's study on the Azande showed that 'witchcraft' was not a string of irrational ideas but rather a system of logically coherent beliefs and practices<sup>4</sup> and ever since anthropologists realized that in colonial situations people often went to religion in order to recreate their sense of cosmos and their dignity either in Melanesian 'cargo cults' or in African and American prophetic movements.<sup>5</sup> Religion has grown up with anthropology, and in fact it would require 'bad faith' to claim that the connection between religion and education has been completely neglected. Durkheim, for a start, saw

religion as fundamentally a mechanism to enable social agents to become well adapted to social groups and he even wrote that the kind of transformation achieved by religion, i.e. ‘conversion’, is – or should be at any rate – similar to the transformation all educators try to effect upon their pupils (Durkheim 1938, quoted in Giddens 1972: 205–15). Durkheim’s major study on religion (Durkheim 1995 [1912]) was based on Australian societies where initiation played a significant role in education and processes of coming of age, and together with the parallel influence of Arnold van Gennep’s work on rites of passage (van Gennep 1960 [1909]), they triggered an anthropological interest in initiations that eventually yielded such extraordinary results as Audrey Richards’ study on female initiation among the Bemba (Richards 1956) and Victor Turner’s study on boy’s initiation among the Ndembu (Turner 1967), to mention just two exemplary analyses of the interface between religion and the making of moral agents in a community. The same interface, of course, has been analysed by anthropologists working on literate societies, and here we should mention the names of Eickelman (1974) and Brenner (2000) as two very important contributors to the study of religious education in Muslim societies.

In the last few years studies of memory and the transmission of the past have blossomed in anthropology (for a critical review, see Berliner 2005a). These studies focus on history as it is lived, on how remembrances shared and transmitted by social groups cling to our past and how we are shaped by it. Some of these recent works have concentrated on the study of ‘collective religious memory’ (in the sense first given by Halbwachs 1994 [1925]: 243–300). This is particularly clear in the powerful study by Jun Jing (Jing 1996), in which he describes memories from the Chinese communist persecution era and the contemporary ‘resurgence of popular religion’ by a people ‘trying to rebuild their life after grievous assaults on their cultural identity, sense of history, and religious faith’ (Jing 1996: 22). This may be a paradigmatic case, but there are other detailed ethnographies testifying to how religious practices can be treated as sites of memory to be transmitted. Without making an exhaustive list, we could here remember, as token examples, the detailed accounts of Maurice Bloch in Madagascar (1998), Paul Stoller in Niger (1995) and Marianne Ferme and Rosalind Shaw in Sierra Leone (Ferme 2001; Shaw 2002).

However, despite the laudable efforts and ethnographic accounts on the interface between religion, transmission and learning, there has been in anthropology, as David Parkin (pers. comm.) has put it: ‘the assumption that religion just happens to people’ and to forget that much time and effort is invested in instructing people. In 1938, Meyer Fortes insightfully noted that ‘a great deal of information has been

accumulated about what is transmitted from one generation to the next ... Of the process of education – how one generation is “moulded” by the superior generation, how it assimilates and perpetuates its cultural heritage – much less is known’ (1970: 14). Since he wrote this, numerous authors have been interested in the diversity of knowledge systems and in the processes of transmission of knowledge, especially in the field of the anthropology of education (Middleton [ed.] 1970; Spindler 1997). Their works, which are too numerous to mention in detail here, deal with the transmission of historical knowledge (Borofsky 1987; Crook 1996; Price 1983; Stobart and Howard 2002), apprenticeship and the transmission of *savoirs faire*s (for a comprehensive bibliography, see Herzfeld 2004), as well as the role of schooling in the transmission of literary knowledge (Bloch 1998; Spindler 1997). However, at least until recently, not many anthropologists were interested in the construction of religious knowledge though there were some well-known exceptions such as the innovative studies of transmission of knowledge in initiatory rituals in Papua New Guinea by F. Barth (1975, 1987) or, more recently, Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s work on transmission (Hervieu-Léger 1997). But apart from these, most contemporary studies of resurgent and syncretistic religions usually take for granted, or give only secondary importance to, the processes of transmission and learning. The precise way religious concepts about supernatural beings are acquired and practices linked to them are learnt has remained largely understudied by anthropologists, despite the above-mentioned anthropologies of learning, education and apprenticeship. Only recently have anthropologists started to think seriously about how the acquisition of religion happens in people’s mind. This has been possible thanks to the progress of a rather new discipline: the cognitive approaches to religion, a field in expansion to which we now turn our attention.

## Explaining Religious Transmission

In recent years, issues of learning and transmission of religious ideas and rituals have received considerable attention in the burgeoning field of cognitive studies. Still marginalized and of little importance for many anthropologists, these cognitive perspectives on religion are nowadays getting an increasing amount of attention in European and American anthropological circles. Indeed, some anthropologists such as Atran (2002), Bloch (1998, 2005), Hirschfeld (1996) and many others have highlighted the crucial role of cognitive psychology in providing new concepts and methods for our discipline, and not only for religion. French anthropologist Dan Sperber is considered by many to

be the father of the cognitive explanatory programme in anthropology, mainly because of his epidemiological model of cultural transmission (Sperber 1996).

Most cognition-oriented anthropologists of today are interested in religion, i.e. in making use of relevant findings of cognitive sciences to illuminate the field of anthropology of religious representations and practices (Boyer 1994, 2001a, 2001b; Højbjerg 2002b; Whitehouse 2001, 2004, 2005). Allied with philosophers such as Lawson, religionists such as McCauley (Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002) and psychologists such as Barrett (2004), they propose to ‘formulate new theories about a wide range of religious materials’ (McCauley and Whitehouse 2005: 2) by borrowing data from cognitive linguistics, evolutionary psychology and cognitive psychology. Although each of these scholars has his or her own perspective, most of them react against what they call ‘the methodological sloppiness of interpretivism and, more generally, of the postmodern critique’ (Whitehouse 2005: 25), calling for an epistemological return to the general and the explanatory in religious studies (Boyer 1994; Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002). They see themselves as theorists about patterns rather than ‘interpreters of meanings’ of religion – more to do with *explaining* than *interpreting* religion (McCauley 2003; see also Lawson and McCauley 1990: 12–31). Rather than engaging with anthropologists, they seem in general to be more willing to enter into dialogue with cognitive sciences, a discipline that by and large has not been interested in religious issues (McCauley and Whitehouse 2005: 3).

Reading Boyer, Whitehouse or McCauley and Lawson, the emphasis is clearly placed on the cognitive mechanisms of *transmission*, i.e. how cognitive properties constrain the formation and transmission of religious representations and practices. As Tanya Luhrmann (this volume) correctly observes, for most of these scholars ‘the problem of religion is the problem of transmission’. In particular, knowing the workings of our mental machinery better can help towards explaining the intricacies of how people acquire religious concepts and practices. Pascal Boyer, for instance, has shown how human ‘cognitive architecture’ plays a crucial causal role in the generation, spread and especially the *acquisition* of religious ideas. His model attempts to explain why certain religious representations are more attention-grabbing, more catchy and ‘yummy’ (writes McCauley) and, thus, more transmissible than others (Boyer 2001b). Boyer finds that religious ideas are those representations that are optimally counter-intuitive, entailing breaches of our intuitive knowledge (for instance, intuitive physics) in such a way that they are attention-grabbing, easily remembered and communicable. Not only do odd, religious supernatural

agents such as witches, ghosts, gods or ancestors subtly violate intuitive ontological expectations about physics and the world but this also explains, according to Boyer, why they persist and get transmitted more easily to other representations.

In the same vein, McCauley and Lawson propose to investigate the intrinsic cognitive properties of religious rituals in order to explain why and how ritual transmission operates. For them, some rites are more transmissible than others, in particular those that ‘pack enough emotional wallop to convince them [participants] that they have dealt with the divine’ (McCauley and Lawson 2002: 211). In fact, to explain the persistence of ritual through time, one has to take into account not only mnemonic issues, but also the motivation of participants to transmit. Some rites ‘contain extensive sensory pageantry that produces elevated levels of emotion’ (*ibid.*: 112), aimed at persuading participants of the divine importance of these rites and at arousing their motivation to transmit them.

These two authors refer to Harvey Whitehouse’s modes of religiosity theory (Whitehouse 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005) and attempt to complicate it. In comparison with his cognition-oriented colleagues, Whitehouse proposes a somehow softer cognitive version of religious transmission. While Boyer claims that what people think and say has little impact on our understanding of religious transmission and that we should search outside conscious awareness, Whitehouse claims that his approach is ‘more flexible, conscious, and context sensitive’ (Whitehouse 2005: 216). He considers people’s statements on religious transmission seriously and sees cognition as something that does not ‘take place exclusively in the brain/mind’ (*ibid.*: 221) and he seems to keep his distance from an only cognitive form of explanation:

Only some aspects of cultural learning can be understood in terms of cognitive ‘hardware’. [...] To understand religious transmission at any depth, we must envisage the mind not as a fixed generic device, such as a computer, but as a constantly developing organic structure ... (Whitehouse 2004: 27).

However, Whitehouse bases his theory of the two modes of religiosity ‘on two distinct mechanisms of long-term memory, founded in the material conditions of the brain’ (Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004: 6). For him, these forms of memory, the semantic and the episodic, correspond to two different styles of religious life: the ‘doctrinal’ mode (sober, organized, and verbal) and the ‘imagistic’ mode (emotional, personal and non-verbal). Accordingly, all religious traditions, from initiation ceremonies in Papua New Guinea to Christian rituals, can be looked at through the lens of this psychological memory-based dichotomy. While the doctrinal mode is characterized by highly

repetitive, routinized forms of religious activities, the imaginistic mode presents very emotionally-loaded religious practices. As for religious transmission, the two modes are also distinct: in the first case, the transmission of religious practice is frequently repeated, standardized and relies on a great deal of explicit verbal knowledge stored in semantic memory (sermon type).<sup>6</sup> In the second case, the imaginistic mode, learning strategies imply infrequent repetitions and often traumatic experiences (such as bush initiations) involving highly emotional arousal that activates episodic or flashbulb memories.

These psychologically inspired models are refreshing for anthropologists, as they shed a different explanatory light on questions of religious transmission and learning. They use what neurologists and psychologists know about the brain and its cognitive constraints and properties and, armed with this knowledge, they attempt to explain how and why religion is transmitted and persists through time. However, some of these authors also recognize the limitations of their cognitive approaches, which may help to explain certain aspects of religious thinking, but leave 'largely undiscussed many features of religious experience [...]' (McCauley and Whitehouse 2005: 4–5). And indeed, the gap between the social and the cognitive can become too wide.

## **Religious Learning as a Social Process**

This volume emerges from an endeavour to fill this gap. We are familiar with these cognitive approaches to religion and, in our view, the cognitivist move toward describing the psychological operations at play in religious thinking and modelling rituals, while helping to explain some specific aspects of religious thinking also risks ignoring the social complexity of religious transmission and learning. There has to be more to the story if one is to understand the *experience* of transmitting/learning religion. 'Acquiring religion' is not merely a cold-blooded technical process of cognitive downloading. It takes place in a specific interactive social and cultural environment, and one must, therefore, also examine it as a 'dimension of social practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 47). As French sociologist Bernard Lahire (2005) reminds us, in a pamphlet denouncing the risk of naturalizing learning, one still has to develop a genetic and disposition-oriented sociology of socialization, which he sees as a description of the concrete, contextual, social conditions of learning and transmission. Indeed, these new cognitive developments '*à la Boyer*' obfuscate the foundational idea that 'cognition, emotion, motivation, perception, imagination, memory ... are social affairs' (Geertz 1983: 153). By

focusing primarily on the kind of cognitive processes and structures involved, they seem to forget that the 'mind is a function of the whole person that is constituted over time in intersubjective relations with others in the environing world' (Toren 1999: 21), and they ignore the entire spectrum of how religious practices, representations and emotions are socially transmitted and learned.

The cognitive study of religion is not, however, the only development in the recent past to have created useful tools to investigate how religion is replicated. Another area that has been crucial in this domain has been that of the anthropology of learning. Indeed, paying special attention to what Jean Lave called 'situated learning', authors such as Jean Lave (Lave and Wenger 1991; Lave and Chaiklin (eds) 1996), Harry Wolcott (1982), Christina Toren (1998, 1999, 2001, 2004), Charles Stafford (1995), Carlo Severi (Severi 2002, 2004), Michael Houseman (2005; Houseman and Severi 1998), Maurice Bloch (1998, 2005), Rita Astuti (1995, 2001) and other anthropologists, together with fine-grained studies about children and socialization (Briggs 1998, Gottlieb 2004, Morton 1996, Thorne 1993), have created a corpus on learning processes that, in some cases, also looks at religious learning. This is seen by these authors as dynamically constituted not by passive 'recipients' but by agents actively engaged in acquisition processes. This is not to deny the importance of cognition (in fact, all these authors are very interested in cognitive issues), but their works show – as do the case studies in this volume – that processes of religious learning and transmission often happen in the interstices of social interaction and not only in the cognitive capacities of people's minds (and, incidentally, not always in the institutional sites where they are supposed to take place either). Thanks to these new approaches emphasizing the interactive and situated dimension of learning and transmission, combined with the cognitive findings of authors such as Sperber, Boyer and Whitehouse, we are becoming increasingly capable of accounting for the ways individuals arrive at religious concepts and practices. By learning religion, we want to understand how people learn religious concepts, values, emotions, attitudes and practices in the very texture of social life and from their own standpoint.

So, how are religious concepts, practices, interactions, and emotions acquired? What are the sites of religious learning (body, language, the media, etc.)? Who are the different agents at stake (teachers, religious experts, elites, women, children)? What are the roles of narratives, objects, places and times in religious learning? How is religious learning seen and verbalized by the actors themselves? What are the connections between politics, ideologies and religious learning? The papers gathered in this volume, as well as those that unfortunately could not make it into the volume but interacted with

them at our meeting in Lisbon, are ethnographic attempts at addressing these questions.

In our eyes, the richness of the papers resides in the fact that their authors are not subscribing to one particular 'school' or another, but that they all combine different anthropological and philosophical approaches, traditions, sources and methods to reveal the social logics of learning and transmitting religious knowledge and behaviour in several settings, including Europe, East Africa and the Indic Ocean, West Africa and the Atlantic, China, North America, South America and Indonesia. Despite each author's singularity and focus, there is an overlapping of themes. They all show the complexity of learning religion that cannot be understood as a monolithic process or just as the reproduction of some immutable knowledge of practices from one generation to another, or from one person to another. It is a rather complex process that involves - apart from repetition and memorization - creativity, interpretation, accident, and concepts that need to be discussed and clarified such as 'belief', 'doubt', 'certainty', 'scepticism', 'conviction', 'possession' and 'participation' (cf. the vindication of doubt and reflexivity in Højbjerg 2002a). It is also a process that involves a multiplicity of agents in interaction, mostly, of course, between adults and children – although this is by no means the only interaction to be taken into account.

Carlo Severi starts the volume with a study of the processes of memorization and recollection involved in what he terms 'learning to believe'. His chapter is a valiant attempt to bring back to the scene the concept of 'belief', which ever since its deconstruction by Rodney Needham (Needham 1972) has found it difficult to find a place in anthropological scrutiny. Today, it is true, many cognitive anthropologists use the concept, but they do so without a great deal of analysis, as Maurice Bloch has already pointed out (Bloch 2002). For Severi, the problem is that too many of us accepted Needham's views according to which the concept was Eurocentric and not translatable into non-Western languages, and therefore did not consider that it might relate to learning processes and states of mind that are to be found cross-culturally. In this preliminary paper, Severi wants to take the issue up where Wittgenstein and Needham left it and continue a philosophical investigation into what exactly a religious belief is and its relationship with faith, certainty and, last but not least, doubt. In order to understand how this state of mind is created, Severi suggests we study the interface between two kinds of memory: a semantic, mechanic memory that transmits fixed content (here exemplified with the transmission of the Christian *Pater Noster* prayer) and a pragmatic memory whose function is not to transmit content but context, and which is fundamental in the transmission of more abstract beliefs, based, as

Severi puts it, ‘on the re-elaboration of hints, through inference and imagination’. The functioning of this latter memory is here exemplified with an intriguing case: the presence in people’s imagination, still in the late twentieth century, of roughly the same belief in the ‘monstrous wolf’ that Robert Louis Stevenson found in Lozère when he did his celebrated travels with a donkey around that French region back in 1878.

Michael Houseman proposes a theoretical approach to learning that, much like Severi’s, insists on transmission of ritual context and social relations. Against the intuitive inclination to see learning as acquisition of content, Houseman shows that in order to understand how rituals are transmitted, looking at ideas and concepts may be much less useful than looking at the very relationships that are played out and reproduced in these rituals. Houseman explores this line of research in two different female rituals of menstruation, one of them being the ‘menstrual slap’ (when a woman slaps her daughter upon finding out the latter has had her first menstruation, thereby creating a flashbulb memory of the event with little semantic content and limited interpretation) and the other a new age rite of coming of age also performed at the first menstruation, much softer and much more semantically elaborated than the menstrual slap. The two cases are very different, but in the performance of both of them a general set of relations are transmitted and womanhood thus constructed in such a way that present iterations relate to past performances. Both achieve this through a combination of what Houseman calls the principles of ‘inferential interpretation’ and that of ‘empathic simulation’, which open up two different ways of transmitting and learning ritual. While the former impels performers to repeat the action that was imposed on them in their inchoate attempt at capturing its meaning, in the latter they are led to act in a stereotyped fashion that agents very self-consciously reproduce in order to act as they think someone else did in a distant, imaginary past.

David Parkin explores the making of a multifaceted religious culture on the East African Swahili coast and Zanzibar, where orthodox Islam meets with both local non-Muslim traditions and with Sufism. It is subsequently where different systems of learning are at play: one based on centripetal notions of knowledge to be kept secret by elders, such as the initiatic traditions, others based on centripetal notions of knowledge to be spread by any knowledgeable person despite their age, such as the Wahabbi reformers, and still others somewhere in the middle, such as the learning traditions of Sufi orders. Parkin’s chapter invites us to see these traditions not as separate modes of learning, each one pitted against the other, but rather as making a continuum with multiple feedbacks among them, with learning persons having to

interpret and incorporate into their knowledge bits and pieces they gather, sometimes accidentally, from everywhere else – a bit like the eunuch with whom we started this introduction, who learned to incorporate the message brought by Philip with his own religious biography and by so doing learned another religion. Following the ideas of Whitehouse, Parkin claims that there is a difference between doctrinal modes based on semantic memory and imaginistic modes of religiosity based on episodic memory, but he suggests that they are not to be seen as opposed modes of religiosity but as mutually enriching ones, for the episodic can (and often does) become part of the doctrine and thus modify it.

In a deeply philosophical text, Michael Lambek reconstructs a long path that goes from mimetic behaviour to the acquisition of religious conviction in the process of learning to be possessed by spirits. After a philosophical survey that takes us from Kierkegaard to Austin in order to explore what it means to be ‘serious’ and to have religious conviction, a problem which Lambek links to the performative power of ritual and religious iteration, he takes us farther away to East Africa (nor too far from Parkin’s field site and an equally multifaceted one) to discuss the life-story of a woman and her process from being possessed to becoming a *fundi* (master, curer). Following this case study, we observe her becoming possessed by spirits and more importantly, growing more and more possessed by, and convinced of, her own abilities. The possessed person, Lambek concludes, is not an immutable, subjacent subject (with apologies for the pleonasm) who makes iterations, but is also the result of these iterations. Learning religion is, one could say, a process of making oneself or, as Kierkegaard put it thereby providing an optimal title for Lambek, of ‘catching up with oneself’.

The issue of possession and of how it makes us re-evaluate our thinking of religious learning reappears in chapters by Tanya Luhrmann, Marcio Goldman, and, to a certain extent, João Vasconcelos (although whether the séances he describes belong to the category of ‘possession’ is, in fact, a matter of contention). All of them would agree with Lambek’s methodological invitation (this volume) that looking at possession from a learning angle may yield many more challenging fruits than following the old epidemiological paradigms.

Tanya Luhrmann’s chapter on evangelical movements in the US has a double agenda: on the one hand, to illustrate how the knowledge of what it means to be in close touch with God is constructed through a consistent feedback between Bible reading, attending meetings and performing rituals. The process of acquiring religious conviction and firm attitudes is discussed along lines that make her chapter a good companion to that of Lambek. On the other hand, the relevance of Luhrmann’s chapter in this collection is her resolve to establish a dia-

logue between cognitive studies of religion such as those of Boyer, Dennett or Whitehouse and other cultural psychological approaches. Her feeling, shared by many of our contributors, is that cognitive aspects must be studied but that religion is not something that happens only in cogitations, and that therefore cognitive approaches have their own internal constrictions and limitations. In order to understand the feelings and bodily experiences of those who are learning to be possessed by religious truth, Luhrmann goes back to one of the most problematic thinkers in the history of anthropology: Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). Lévy-Bruhl, a poorly studied and often misrepresented scholar, introduced in anthropology a concept with a long history in Western philosophy: that of ‘participation’ (*methexis*, in Platonic usage) which, unlike its far too frequently used and even abused twin sibling *mimesis*, has kept a rather low profile in our discipline. Luhrmann convincingly argues that the concept is still useful to help understand the kind of experiences of those who suddenly feel part of something larger than themselves. Other than a vindication of a forgotten author, Luhrmann’s chapter and exploration of participative thinking and learning offers a good model to acknowledge that while cognition is important in learning there are also aspects that involve vivid experiences rather than the acquisition of concepts or the application of templates and that consequently need other models, concepts and paradigms to account for them.

To many a reader, the mention of Lévy-Bruhl will immediately bring to mind the name of Marcio Goldman, the Brazilian author of a monograph on the French philosopher (Goldman 1994). In his contribution to this volume, Goldman, also a specialist in Candomblé and in the historiography of Afro-Brazilian cults, explores how one learns to be possessed in Candomblé and, much like Lurhmann, he finds that exploring philosophical thought may be a more fruitful avenue than exploring mental processes. Candomblé is a religion with very little explicit doctrine or theology. As with many other religions across cultures, there have been, of course, efforts at systematizing a ‘Candomblé cosmology’, but what really is at the core of this cult is a vivid experience of becoming. Following Bastide, Goldman prefers to talk about ‘ontology’ (a very fluid one at that) rather than a fixed cosmology, and in order to explore the central importance of becoming in this fluid ontology, he looks for a hermeneutical tool in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. Goldman also finishes his chapter with a re-examination of Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of participation and of the hot debate it gave rise to among such funding scholars as Marcel Mauss and Roger Bastide.

João Vasconcelos follows a similar path to that of Goldman and, to a certain extent, Lurhmann as well. In his study of Christian Rationalism, a spiritual movement quite popular in Cape Verde today

but originally an offshoot of Brazilian forms of Kardecism, Vasconcelos shows how middle-aged women learn to interpret their unusual experiences as spiritual presences and thus become mediums. Like Luhrmann, Vasconcelos finds cognitive approaches useful to explore the kind of concepts we normally consider part of religion, but limited when it comes to explaining how the acquisition of religious ideas or, as he prefers to put it, spiritual knowledge, is related to past lived-through experiences and to the non-representational aspects of this spiritual knowledge. Following Max Weber's distinction between an experienced or, in Weber's own terms, 'possessed' faith and a 'rationalized' theology, Vasconcelos attempts to grasp the former – much like Goldman does in his work on Candomblé – by analysing the ethnographic material and the life stories of Christian Rationalist female mediums through the philosophical lens of Deleuzian notions of 'becoming' and the philosopher's distinctions between 'affects' and 'precepts'. Beyond the depth of the analysis, the chapter should also become a useful methodological tool for anthropologists of religion as it illustrates a characteristic dilemma of the discipline: while having to explain how people incorporate new ideas and experiences in their biographies and societies, anthropologists – who ideally ought to remain as 'musically unreligious' as possible in keeping with Weber's concepts – must incorporate their findings into a body of literature and social scientific paradigms that risks taking them far away from people's lived world, and thereby making the analyses irrelevant, in order to assess the importance of religious ideas in people's lives. Vasconcelos offers a good model of how to explain religious ideas scientifically *and* still get hold of their fundamental importance for those who live with them.

Ethnolinguist Aurora Donzelli explores how the new commodification of ritual speech affects the nature of both religious transmission and the ideology of transmission. In her study we can see how pervading notions of 'development' and 'modernization', introduced in Indonesia by colonizers, Calvinist missionaries and post-colonial discourses entangle with the practice of learning ritual speech. Until recently, traditional Toraja ritual speech was considered the outcome of passivity on the part of the learner, and its transmission as the passing down of fixed notions and formulae. People did not acknowledge human agency: it was as though in order to become a good orator the word had to descend upon you rather than you train for its usage. Today it is increasingly perceived as the outcome of a training in which the role of the performer is not only acknowledged, but proudly vindicated and even protected both by a shared understanding of 'copyright' and by secrecy – and in this respect the new ritual speech meets the old one, equally enveloped in secrecy, although the reasons for

secrecy are different. This shift in the ideology of ritual learning from passive recipient to active searcher and writer has to do with global shifts in Indonesian societies, with the role of objectified notions of 'tradition' and of 'religion' in the public sphere and in political discourses and with the development of a new, 'modernizing' subjectivity.

Laurence Hérault's chapter explores how the meaning of communion is constructed in Protestant and Catholic catechisms in Europe. She starts by tracing some recent changes in the very ideology of Christian teaching. In the past, catechism was based on the rigid model of transmission (the 'mechanic memory', to use Severi's concept), the catechised being obliged to memorize a series of mysterious, unintelligible information entirely by heart. Nowadays, catechism (or at least this is what their practitioners say) is not based on mechanic memorization but on acquiring the basic competences upon which the boy or girl will build some knowledge about faith and freely choose to be a Christian (or not). Hérault looks at the performance of the teaching in the two churches and in particular at how children learn to believe in the solemnity of the act of communion. Despite the fact that one of the most important bones of contention between Catholicism and Protestantism is that according to Catholicism the host is the body of Christ while for Calvinists it is a sign but no 'real presence', what Hérault observed in her fieldwork was that such theological nuances were played down in catechesis. However, she observed some fundamental differences; thus, while for Catholic youths the communion is taught as a 'mystery' about which nothing other is to be sought, Protestant children are not told much about its nature, mysterious or not, but instead are instructed to pay attention to (and try to reproduce as closely as possible) the ritual performance and the distribution and relations among participants.

Charles Stafford has written a thought-provoking chapter on the ways religious practices in China create a setting for children to fully develop cognitive competences necessary to think about gods and about other people's inner intentions and to start growing up as religious people. Stafford argues that while much religious discourse (things said during rituals by ritual specialists) is meant to transmit a message, in fact folks attending the ritual are very often not only not listening to it but also doing other things, or at least focusing their attention on something else. Stafford's ethnography suggests that what attracts people *about* religion (and *towards* religion), i.e., what makes it *interesting*, is precisely those aspects that make it easier for people to connect spirits and extraordinary beliefs to ordinary life: religion becomes real and ordinary because it has so many things in common with everyday reality. While Stafford acknowledges that much of religion is transmitted by people just being there, looking around and

absorbing attitudes from their environment, his chapter warns against the abuse of such notions as 'habitus', 'embodied' memories or 'unconscious' learning with which anthropologists have been explaining cultural transmission over the last twenty years but that get little support from psychologists (and sometimes their explicit questioning). In order to explain the kind of religious socialization that children are subjected to he invites us instead to do what so far only few anthropologists are willing – and able – to do: to look at the psychology of learning, to investigate actors as they activate their faculties in order to pay attention to and grasp the world around them and the thoughts of those who surround them. After a description of China and Taiwan and an exploration of people's theories of spirits and of minds, Stafford ends his paper encouraging anthropologists to dialogue more openly with Paul Harris (2000), undoubtedly the one psychologist who over the last years has done most original research on children's minds and religious imaginations.

The volume closes with Michael Rowlands inviting us to look at what some would wrongly consider merely peripheral aspects of religious transmission, such as sound, music and noise. Rowlands claims that noise and music are crucial for the establishment of certain kinds of emotional states and assumptions about social relations. It is not that music *transmits* these messages, but rather that it *is* the message: in their immediacy, sounds can provide a sense of living in a harmonious world or in a disordered hell. When talking about cognition we should be looking not only at concepts and logical inferences, but also at the kind of 'envelope' (in particular 'sound envelope') in which cogitations happen and in which we feel socially included. Rowlands' ethnographic case study from the Grassfields (Cameroon), which is accompanied by a theoretical discussion on the political economy of noise, shows the social relevance of the 'sonoric baths' surrounding and reinforcing notions of ancestors, secrets, well-being, fear, witches and contact with the invisible realm. In this part of Africa, sound is very important in ritual masquerades and cementing a structural dichotomy between village and forest, day and night, ambivalent forces that may work towards group cohesion (and individual excellence within the group) or against the group or particular individuals, in which case they are 'unblocked' through ritual and sound. Rowlands discusses how these notions at the village level play an unheard-of (with apologies for the pun) relevance among 'new born' (Pentecostal) converts, for whom learning about spirits, God, ancestors, witches, 'the devil' and more petrified notions of good and evil through sounds and noise is inscribed in a path towards self-realization, although one leading to somewhat new forms of wealth and success. New they are indeed, but the social logics that articulate them are

as old as they are unexplored unfortunately if looked at from the angle of sound envelopes and of their potential for inclusion and exclusion.

Without learning, without transmission, there is no such thing as religion. All in all, this fine collection of essays should help the reader, as they did the organizers of the colloquium and the authors themselves, to continue this line of research and encourage further discussion on the subtle realities of learning religion. Nothing is set in stone in such a complex area as the anthropological study of religion, and whatever is set in stone is subject to new interpretations. We will be happy if even the issues upon which there may be disagreement should give rise to further debate, interdisciplinary dialogues and research.

## Notes

1. In a detailed study of notions of 'tradition' and 'passing down' from a semiological point of view, Peter Jackson (2004) has written one of the most thorough revisions of Cicero's *relego*. Without ruling out 'recollection' as a translation he goes beyond it in order to capture the complexity of the Latin verb and glosses it as 'to pick up again, to go back over, retrace (a path), to transverse an area again' (Jackson 2004: 2).
2. Many of the short essays collected in two companion volumes to religion (Taylor (ed.) 1998, Braun and McCutcheon (eds) 2000) also show a strong influence of J. Z. Smith upon their respective authors and therefore a spirit, rare until now in both the history of religions and the anthropology of religion, to listen to each other.
3. As Maurice Bloch (2002: 239) succinctly put it: 'there is no such *thing* as religion, other than the somewhat, but only somewhat, similar phenomena one finds in different places, and which remind the observer, in a theoretically insignificant way, therefore, of what we have been brought up to understand by the term'.
4. It is worth noting that Zande witchcraft has become a paradigm of African religions and systematically used by anthropologists and philosophers to exemplify the kind of notions and beliefs we call 'religious' (for instance by Pascal Boyer 2001b: 14, 20) while, in fact, Evans-Pritchard himself did *not* consider it part of Zande 'religion' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 3). This poses interesting questions about who decides what 'religion' is and supports Maurice Bloch's caution (see note 3) that maybe one of the problems of contemporary cognitive anthropologists is that they have found the 'object' of the study of religion a bit to hastily and uncritically.
5. So far we have only knitted together a few elements of the very complex history of anthropology of religion to tune the reader into the theme of this volume. The most erudite, succinct and up-to-date history of this discipline we can think of as a companion to this introduction is the overview provided by Wendy James in chapter 5 ('Ritual, Memory, and Religion') of her latest book *The Ceremonial Animal: A New Portrait of Anthropology* (James 2003: 100–136).
6. Without delving into a complete analysis, we note that, following cognitive psychologist Alan Baddeley, Whitehouse distinguishes between 'semantic memory' (mental representations of a general, propositional nature, such as the knowledge one has concerning road signs or how to behave in a restaurant) and 'episodic memory' (mental representations of specific events that one has personally experienced).

