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Early Christian Views on Jesus' Resurrection
Toward a Cognitive Psychological Interpretation[*]

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Abstract

This article examines the cognitive capacities of the human mind that underlie the concept of Jesus' resurrection. The first part of the article surveys some alternative traditions about Jesus' death and resurrection in early Christian thought. In the second part, the relevant cognitive structures will be discussed. We will examine, in particular, how the human mind deals with agency, intentionality, and counterintuitiveness. The final part of the study will interpret the idea of the resurrected Jesus in the light of these cognitive capacities and give an explanation of the long-term success of the canonical story.

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1. One Theme with Many Variations

Jesus' resurrection has been a central theme in early Christian tradition.[1] Our earliest written evidence of what Christians believed about Jesus' resurrection is found in Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians, written around 50 AD: '(…) how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead'.[2] In another passage of the same epistle, Paul quotes a formulaic statement about Jesus' death and resurrection: 'For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died'.[3] Finally, some three years later, Paul offers a more elaborate account in 1 Corinthians:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.[4]

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[1] For recent studies on the origins and earliest history of the idea, see U.B. Müller, *Die Entstehung des Glaubens an die Auferstehung Jesu*, Stuttgart 1998; F. Avemarie & H. Lichtenberger (eds.), *Auferstehung – Resurrection*, Tübingen 2001; P. Piovanelli, 'Pre- and Post-canonical Passion Stories: Insights into the Development of Christian Discourse on the Death of Jesus', *Apocrypha* 14 (2003), 99-128; D.C. Allison, Jr., *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters*, New York 2005; J.H. Charlesworth et al., *Resurrection: The Origin and Future of a Biblical Doctrine*, London 2006.

[2] 1 Thess. 1:9-10. Translations of passages from the New Testament follow the New Revised Standard Version. For dating 1 Thessalonians around 50 AD, see H. Köster, *Einführung in das Neue Testament im Rahmen der Religionsgeschichte und Kulturgeschichte der hellenistischen und römischen Zeit*, Berlin and New York 1980, 545; N. Perrin & D. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*, San Diego and New York 1982, 51; A.J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (The Anchor Bible), New York 2000, 73.

[3] 1 Thess. 4:14. Both its concise and solemn structure ('if we believe … then also God') and the non-Pauline vocabulary ('Jesus' and ἀνίσταμαι instead of 'Christ' and ἐγείρω) suggest that the passage is a pre-Pauline creedal formula. Cf. K. Wengst, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums*, Gütersloh 1972, 45-46; T. Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 13), Zürich and Neukirchen-Vluyn 1990², 186, 190-192; F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Word Biblical Commentary, 45), Dallas 1998, 96-97; hesitantly Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 265.

[4] 1 Cor. 15:3-5. For dating the epistle to 53–54, see Köster, *Einführung*, 554, and Perrin & Duling, *The New Testament*, 175; Ch. Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament, 7), Berlin 1996, 13.

This narrative can be regarded as the 'standard' view of Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament. All four canonical gospels also include the same basic narrative structure, consisting of Jesus' death, resurrection, and his subsequent appearances to the disciples. (Later on, I will come back to the possibility that Mark in its earliest version did not contain the resurrection scene.) Whereas different writings in the New Testament state different things about Jesus' heavenly (pre-)existence, birth, life on Earth, as well as the significance of his life, death, and resurrection, the narrative scheme of 1 Cor. 15:3-5 remains unchallenged in them.

Yet the basic narrative sequence of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was not accepted by all Christian believers. The very same chapter of 1 Corinthians provides evidence that competing views existed already in the early fifties. In that chapter, Paul was writing to believers in Corinth who 'said that there was no resurrection of the dead' (1 Cor. 15:12). Those Corinthians rejected both Paul's account of Jesus' resurrection and the idea of resurrection in general (cf. vv. 2b, 11, 12). The position of Paul's opponents about Jesus cannot be fully recovered from the available evidence, but they certainly rejected at least his view of Jesus' resurrection in body.[5]

We are on firmer ground regarding the alternative views about Jesus' death and resurrection if we move to the second century. A denial of Jesus' resurrection can be inferred from second century views about him as a merely human being. As Justin Martyr writes in his *Dialogue with Trypho* 48.4 (*c.* 160):

For there are some, my friends, I said, of our race, who admit that He is Christ, while holding Him to be man of men (ἄνθρωπον δὲ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γενόμενον).

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[5] Cf. Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 353-354; W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 7), vol. 4, Düsseldorf and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2001, 111-119.

From the late second century, such views were often stamped as 'Ebionite', a label first employed by Irenaeus of Lyon in his *Against the Heresies* (written *c.* 180–185), and from then on frequently reused in the catalogues of heresies.[6] Irenaeus claims that Ebionites follow the teachings of Cerinthus and Carpocrates about Jesus. To the former he ascribes views that we will discuss under 'Docetism' below. Carpocrates taught that

Jesus was the son of Joseph, and was just like other men (ὅμοιον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις γεγονότα), with the exception that (…) his soul was steadfast and pure [and] he perfectly remembered those things which he had witnessed within the sphere of the unbegotten God. On this account, a power descended upon him from the Father, that by means of it he might escape from the creators of the world; and they say that it, after passing through them all, and remaining in all points free, ascended again to him. (…) This idea has raised them to such a pitch of pride, that some of them declare themselves similar to Jesus; while others, still more mighty, maintain that they are superior to his disciples, such as Peter and Paul, and the rest of the apostles, whom they consider to be in no respect inferior to Jesus (κατὰ μηδένα ἀπολείπεσθαι τοῦ Ἰησοῦ).[7]

The origins and exact nature of the Ebionite views are not going to be our concerns in the present essay.[8] As they were Jews, they probably did not deny (unlike Paul's opponents in Corinth) that Jesus would be resurrected on the last day. In fourth century Alexandria, Arius established another teaching that later has routinely been identified with the denial of Jesus' divine nature. It is remarkable, however, that whereas Jesus'

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[6] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.26.2. For a recent introduction on the Ebionites, see S. Häkkinen, 'Ebionites', in A. Marjanen & P. Luomanen (eds.), *A Companion to Second-Century Christian Heretics*, Leiden 2005, 247-248.

[7] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.20.1; trans. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, Edinburgh and Grand Rapids (Mich.) 1885, 351-352.

[8] In addition to Häkkinen, 'Ebionites', see also G.P. Luttikhuizen, *De veelvormigheid van het vroegste Christendom*, Delft 2002, 90-92.

miraculous birth and divine origin were frequently debated in (late) antiquity, his resurrection was much less controversial. In later Church history, such groups have always appeared as marginal minorities, such as Unitarians from the 16th century or Jehovah's witnesses from the late 19th century to the present day.

Another major group of views about Jesus' death and resurrection can be labelled as 'Docetic'.[9] Docetic views emphasise the divine element in Jesus and argue that he was exempt from suffering and death. In the study of this tradition we are not totally dependent on the biased accounts of the heresiologists. The *Apocryphal Acts of John*, written in its final form in the late second century,[10] contains a short gospel, including an intriguing account of the crucifixion. The *Gospel of the Acts of John*[11] begins with a prologue and the call of the disciples at the sea, reports Jesus' transfiguration (in two versions), a visit to the house of a Pharisee, and the multiplication of bread. There are episodes that do not readily evoke any of the canonical gospel narratives: John watches Jesus on several occasions, Jesus never blinks his eyes, leaves no footprints on the ground, and once pulls John's beard. A ritual dance replaces the last supper, and a peculiar crucifixion scene, concluding directly with the ascension, closes this section. John reports the events in a first person narrative:

Even I, when I saw him suffer, did not abide at his passion but fled to the Mount of Olives, weeping over what had taken place. And when he was hung upon the cross on Friday, at the sixth hour of the day, there came darkness over all the earth. And my Lord

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[9] P.J. Lalleman, *The Acts of John: A Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism*, Leuven 1998, 204-212; W. Löhr, 'Doketismus I. Christentum', in H.-D. Betz & J. Persch (eds.), *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 2, Tübingen 1999[4], 925-927.

[10] I. Czachesz, 'Eroticism and Epistemology in the Apocryphal Acts of John', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 60 (2006), 59-72; idem, *Commission Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, Leuven 2007, 120-122 (for previous dating attempts, see *ibidem*, 92, note 1).

[11] For the *Gospel of the Acts of John*, see I. Czachesz, 'The *Gospel of Peter* and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Using Cognitive Science to Reconstruct Gospel Traditions', in T. Nicklas & Th.J. Kraus (eds.), *Das Petrusevangelium als Teil antiker Literatur*, Berlin 2007, 245-261.

stood in the middle of the cave and lit it up, and said, 'John, to the multitude down below in Jerusalem I am being crucified, and pierced with lances and reeds, and gall and vinegar is given me to drink. But to you I am speaking, and pay attention to what I say.' (*Acts of John* 97)

Later in the same dialogue, Jesus states unmistakably: 'Therefore I have suffered none of the things which they will say of me' (*Acts of John* 101). Finally, 'When he had spoken to me these things and others which I know not how to say as he would have me, he was taken up, without any of the multitude having seen him.' The claim that Jesus did not suffer agrees with what we know from the earliest references to Docetists in Ignatius of Antioch (early second century) as 'the unbelievers' (ἄπιστοι) who say that 'he only seemed to suffer' (τὸ δοκεῖν πεπονθέναι αὐτόν).[12] The duplication of Jesus that also occurs in the *Acts of John* is a frequent solution to avoid that Jesus would have to suffer and die. Irenaeus attributes to Basilides of Alexandria (*c.* 130) the view that Jesus exchanged his appearance with that of Simon of Cyrene, who died in his place. Other thinkers divided Jesus into three or even four different elements.[13] During the Middle Ages, Docetic ideas appeared among various dissident groups, such as the Paulicians (9th c.), the Bogomils (10–11th c.), the Cathars (11–13th c.), and others.[14]

Even a short survey of early Christian views regarding Jesus' death and resurrection suggests that the varieties are countless. Not only have Christians disagreed whether Jesus was resurrected or not, they also debated whether this involved his body, and whether Jesus and the divine saviour were the same person. Various groups maintained different nuances and combinations of these positions. A possible way to

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[12] Ignatius, *Smyrn.* 2; *Trall.* 10:1; cf. *Smyrn.* 4:1-2; 5:2.

[13] E.g. *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII, 3). Cf. H. Havelaar, *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* (Texte und Untersuchungen, 144), Berlin 1999; Luttikhuizen, *De veelvormigheid*, 141-148; idem, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions*, Leiden 2005, ch. 11; Löhr, 'Doketismus', 925-926.

[14] Löhr, 'Doketismus', 926.

study this diversity is to consider the influence of cultural and intertextual traditions on the development of early Christian views on Jesus, as well as the mutual relations and influences of the different Christologies. In this essay, we will follow an alternative strategy, approaching the different ideas from a psychological point of view.

2. Resurrection: Perspectives from Cognitive Science

The human mind has been shaped by the situations that our human ancestors experienced for tens of thousands of years; many features of the mind, however, wear the imprint of millions of years of evolutionary history. Our minds have not developed to think about everything in the world, but primarily to secure our survival in a particular environment, posing a particular set of challenges. Therefore, we are predisposed to pay attention to specific aspects of the world around us (e.g., predators, prey, human faces, depth), and think in specific ways about that information (e.g., fighting, fleeing, cooperating, mating).[15] Various higher cognitive functions may have emerged from the combination and secondary utilisation of such primary coping mechanisms.[16] Recent cognitive studies of religion argue that our basic religious concepts are rooted precisely in those mechanisms of our minds[17]. For the purposes of this article, it is not necessary to explicate a wholesale cognitive theory of religion. We will only focus on two relevant issues: insights about *agency* are helpful in understanding why the idea of a resurrected Jesus matters, whereas the theory of

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[15] Evolutionary psychology examines such aspects of human cognition. A representative study is S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, London 1997.

[16] S. Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science*, London 1996, 151-216.

[17] P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, London 2001, 106-154; S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, New York 2002, 51-79; I. Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion*, Leiden 2003, 18-22.

minimal counterintuitiveness explains why some forms of this idea have become more widespread than others.

Humans think about their environment using ontological categories.[18] Ontological categories represent 'the most fundamental conceptual cuts one can make in the world, such as those between animals and plants, artefacts and animals, and the like'.[19] Experiments have also shown that 'at the ontological level there are clusters of properties that unambiguously and uniquely belong to all members of a given category at that level. All animals are alive, have offspring, and grow in ways that only animals do'.[20]

An important argument for the universality of such ontologies is derived from Chomskian linguistics and evolutionary psychology. Noam Chomsky's idea of a universal grammar was inspired by his observation that children are exposed to much less grammatical examples than what would be needed in order that they can acquire syntax in an inductive manner from experience – consequently, some syntactic structures must be innate to the human mind.[21] Leda Cosmides and John Tooby have extended Chomsky's *poverty of stimulus* argument to other domains of knowledge and concluded that in order to cope successfully with their environment, humans must be born with a set of specialised mental modules.[22] Building on arguments from evolutionary psychology, Alfonso Caramazza and Jennifer R. Shelton have recently proposed that at least some categories are represented by dedicated neuronal structures

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[18] F.C. Keil, *Semantic and Conceptual Development: An Ontological Perspective*, Cambridge (Mass.) and London 1979, 46-62.

[19] F.C. Keil, *Concepts, Kinds, and Cognitive Development*, Cambridge (Mass.) and London 1989, 196.

[20] Keil, *Concepts, Kinds*, 214.

[21] N. Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, The Hague 1957; idem, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge 1965, 3-4; idem, *Language and Mind*, New York and Chicago 1968, 4.

[22] L. Cosmides and J. Tooby, 'Origins of Domain Specificity: The Evolution of Functional Organization', in L.A. Hirschfeld & S.A. Gelman (eds.), *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*, Cambridge 1994, 85-116 (obviously enough, we cannot discuss here the totality of their arguments).

in the brain (i.e. they are 'hard-wired').[23] There is no agreement on the exact number of ontological categories, but the following list seems probable: HUMAN, ANIMAL, PLANT, ARTIFACT, and (natural) OBJECT.[24] It is important to notice that these ontological categories are not philosophical constructs that people report when asked about how they think about the world. They rather reflect patterns of expectations toward the world which can be studied by *implicitly* gathering data about people's beliefs in experiments.

Among the cross-culturally shared ontological categories, animals and humans occupy as special position, inasmuch as they are thought about as self-propelling, intentional agents, who perceive what is going on around them, react to those events, have goals and form plans (that is, have intentions and are therefore called *intentional agents*).[25] According to Stewart Guthrie and Justin Barrett, humans developed an oversensitive reaction to the presence of agency in the environment, which contributed to the emergence of belief in gods and spirits.[26] In our evolutionary past, the dangers of not detecting an agent were much more serious than mistakenly detecting one that was not there. Consequently, intentional agency provides one of the most fundamental

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[23] A. Caramazza and J.R. Shelton, 'Domain-Specific Knowledge Systems in the Brain: The Animate-Inanimate Distinction', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 10 (1998), 1-34.

[24] Keil, *Semantic and Conceptual Development*, 48; S. Atran, 'Basic Conceptual Domains', *Mind and Language* 4 (1989), 7-16; idem, *In Gods We Trust*, 98; P. Boyer, 'Cognitive Constraints on Cultural Representations', in L.A. Hirschfeld & S.A. Gelman (eds.), *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*, Cambridge 1994, 391-411, esp. 400-401; idem, *Religion Explained*, 90.

[25] A. Leslie, 'ToMM, ToBy, and Agency: Core Architecture and Domain Specificity', in L. Hirschfeld & S. Gelman (eds.), *Mapping the Mind*, Cambridge 1994, 119-148; idem, 'A Theory of Agency', in D. Sperber, D. Premack & A.J. Premack (eds.), *Causal Cognition*, Oxford 1996, 121-141; R.A. Barton, 'Primate Brain Evolution: Cognitive Demands of Foraging or of Social Life?', in S. Boinski et al. (eds.), *On the Move: How and Why Animals Travel in Groups?*, Chicago 2000, 204-237.

[26] S.E. Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, New York 1993; J.L. Barrett, 'Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2000), 29-34; cf. W. Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1996.

explanatory frameworks to make sense of the world around us.[27] Although modern Westerners are educated to reason about their environment in terms of mechanistic causality, they are able to do so only if they have ample time and resources. Our first hand reactions are often based on intentional agency as much as the reactions of our ancestors were.

Whereas some level of sensitivity for agency can be attributed to many species, the human mind has an especially well-developed ability to keep track of the thoughts and feelings of other people, often referred to in cognitive science as the Theory of Mind.[28] This system can also be used when the person whose behaviour we are simulating is absent. When someone dies, some of these mental tools can be easily switched off, as it were: we do not expect the dead person to move or speak, for example. Other mechanisms, however, do not stop working: we keep talking to a dead relative and have strong feelings of how he or she would think, speak, or act in a given situation.[29] After all, our ability to simulate the thoughts and feelings of other people works perfectly even without a sensory input. Therefore, dead people are an easily conceivable form of supernatural agents. In many cultures, indeed, ancestors play a central role in religion. They are very close to ordinary humans, except for a few attributes, such as having bodies and being constrained by them in their motion. Our ability to think about supernatural beings in that way is further supported by various observations in our natural environment. Seeds are transformed into plants, eggs into chicken, caterpillars into butterflies. Metamorphoses happen around us, this is exactly

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[27] Cf. D. Dennett, 'Intentional Systems', *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), 87-106; idem, *The Intentional Stance*, Cambridge 1987; idem, D.C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York 2006, 108-114.
[28] Ch. Frith & U. Frith, 'Theory of Mind' *Current Biology* 15 (2005), R644.
[29] J.M. Bering, 'Intuitive Conceptions of Dead Agents' Minds: The Natural Foundations of Afterlife Beliefs as Phenomenological Boundary', *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 2 (2002), 263-308.

the common-sense observation on which Paul builds his argument about resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35-53; cf. John 12:24).

If we take into account the general human predisposition to detect agency in the environment, and take it together with the inclination to attribute thoughts and feelings to the dead, we can understand various aspects of the concept of the resurrected Jesus. Believers could easily feel that Jesus as a dead person was still around and continued to have psychological states. Jesus as an intentional agent could also be built into their intuitive explanations of the world. There are a number of additional cognitive mechanisms, however, which characterise gods and spirits and make them different from the invisible friends of children, for example.[30] We need not investigate all these elements (such as cooperation, moral intuitions, and rituals) in the present article, since they are common to most divine figures and do not tell us about the cognitive factors underlying the early Christian tradition of Jesus' death and resurrection. One of the factors, however, played a crucial role in the formation of the tradition and now we have to turn our attention to it.

In his theory of *counterintuitiveness*, Pascal Boyer hypothesised that religious ideas typically violate intuitive expectations about ordinary events and states, inasmuch as they 'combine certain schematic assumptions provided by intuitive ontologies with nonschematic ones provided by explicit cultural transmission'.[31] Or, as he more recently summarised his model, 'religious concepts generally include explicit violations of expectations associated with domain concepts',[32] that is, they violate the attributes that

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[30] M. Taylor, *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*, New York 1999; E.V. Hoff, 'A Friend Living Inside Me – The Forms and Functions of Imaginary Companions', *Imagination, Cognition and Personality: The Scientific Study of Consciousness* 24 (2005), 151-190.
[31] P. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley and London 1994, 48, 121, and passim.
[32] P. Boyer & C. Ramble, 'Cognitive Templates for Religious Concepts: Cross-cultural Evidence for Recall of Counter-intuitive Representations', *Cognitive Science* 25 (2001), 535-564, esp. 536.

already children intuitively associate with ontological categories. The idea of a ghost that can go through walls, for example, is based on the ontological category of human beings, but violates our expectations about intuitive physics that should otherwise apply to humans. Concepts that contain such violations, Boyer suggests, 'are more salient than other types of cultural information, thereby leading to enhanced acquisition, representation, and communication.'[33]

In an experiment devised to test Boyer's theory, psychologists Justin Barrett and Melanie Nyhof added three types of concepts to a simple narrative framework:[34] (1) expectation-violating items that included a feature that violates intuitive assumptions for the ontological category to which the object belongs (e.g., a living thing that never dies); (2) bizarre items that included a highly unusual feature that violates no category-level assumption (e.g., a living thing that weighs 5000 kilograms is strange, but such a feature is not excluded by ontological expectations about living things); (3) ordinary items with a usual feature (e.g., a living thing that requires nutrients to survive). Subjects had to read the story and write it down from memory; the results were used as input data for a second generation, whose versions in turn were read and written down by a third group.[35] Barrett and Nyhof found that during the three subsequent recalls of the story, counterintuitive and bizarre items were remembered significantly better than common items. On the average, 5 of the original 18 items were remembered after the third generation recalled the story, including 2.11 counterintuitive items, 1.89 bizarre

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[33] Boyer & Ramble, 'Cognitive Templates', 538.

[34] J.L. Barrett & M.A. Nyhof, 'Spreading Non-natural Concepts: The Role of Intuitive Conceptual Structures in Memory and Transmission of Cultural Materials', *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 1 (2001), 69-100. We discuss only the second and third from a series of four experiments. The first version (pp. 73-77) was based on Frederic Bartlett's classical 'War of the Ghosts' experiment; cf. F. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, Cambridge 1954.

[35] Actually nine variations of the basic narrative were created to balance various anticipated biases and each generation produced two sets of recalls, both of which served as inputs for the next generations (Barrett & Nyhof, 'Spreading Non-natural Concepts', 78-80).

items, and only 0.89 ordinary ones. Another interesting result was the massive transformation of bizarre items toward counterintuitive structures. In a subsequent experiment, Barrett and Nyhof modified the items in the story from abstract ('a living thing') to more concrete ones ('a dog') as well as they used oral communication and a more spontaneous setting. The participants were inadvertently approached after three month to reproduce the narrative once more. The advantage of counterintuitive items was evident, once again, by both immediate and delayed recall.

In an analogous way, Pascal Boyer and Charles Ramble set up three sets of experiments in different cultural environments: among French university students, illiterate people in Gabon, and theologically trained Buddhist monks in Nepal, respectively.[36] In all three environments, ideas violating intuitive ontological expectations were better remembered. Whereas they used similar texts as did Barrett and Nyhof, their design was different at several points and resulted in two additional findings. In one of the experiments, Boyer and Ramble combined two types of violations.[37] For example, 'only remembering what did not happen' already violates expectation for objects with a psychology (such as humans or animals), but this feature was added to an object without psychological processes (such as a piece of furniture). They found that twofold violations were less memorable than single ones. The experiment yielded another interesting result in Nepal. It seemed that whereas single violations of intuitive ontological categories increased the memorability of information in general, Buddhist monks were less sensitive to violations attached to persons than violations attached to objects. Boyer and Ramble speculated that this was due to their theological training, during which they routinely dealt with divine beings and became less sensitive for that type of violations.

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[36] Boyer & Ramble, 'Cognitive Templates'.
[37] Boyer & Ramble, 'Cognitive Templates', 546-550.

Ara Norenzayan and Scott Atran conducted a different experiment.[38] They suspected that the narrative framework in the previous experiments biased the recall of different types of items; therefore they gave subjects only lists of items without a narrative framework.[39] Another difference was that Norenzayan and Atran also examined the memorability of sets of ideas, arguing that in real life cultural information is transmitted in packages. Their initial findings seemed to challenge Boyer's theory: the more intuitive an item or a set of items was, the better it was remembered. The same result was received after a delay of one week. Norenzayan and Atran suggested that the difference resulted from the omission of the narrative framework. They argued that the stories used by other experimenters were 'science fiction tales' that biased subjects toward interesting items. However, when Norenzayan and Atran compared the results of the immediate and delayed recalls (after three minutes and one week, respectively), they found that memory for minimally counterintuitive items decayed less than for intuitive or excessively violating ones. As for belief sets, Norenzayan and Atran found that the least decay occurred when the majority of items in the set were intuitive, only a small number being counterintuitive.[40]

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[38] Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 100-107; A. Norenzayan & S. Atran, 'Cognitive and Emotional Processes in the Cultural Transmission of Natural and Nonnatural Beliefs', in M. Schaller & C.S. Crandall (eds.), *The Psychological Foundations of Culture*, Mahwah (N.J.) and London 2004, 149-169.

[39] As in the previous experiments, the lists were balanced against various influences (Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 101-103).

[40] A look at Barrett and Nyhof's results ('Spreading Non-natural Concepts', 85-87, 89-90) reveals that also in their experiment the memory of counterintuitive ideas decayed less; they paid no attention to this probably because of the absolute advantage of such concepts in both immediate and delayed recalls in the experiment.

3. The Resurrected Jesus in the Light of Cognitive Theory

We have seen how recent psychological insights about intentional agents in human thought and experimental results regarding people's feelings about the dead help us to understand why the idea of the resurrected Jesus was plausible. One should notice, however, that this report does not take into account what people might have thought about how Jesus' resurrection precisely occurred. This is also not the main concern of early Christian tradition. Whereas various stories about Jesus and the apostles raising dead people do contain details about how they came back to life (e.g. John 11:43-44; *Acts of Peter* 28), such details are not mentioned about Jesus' resurrection. This validates our focus on how people thought about the resurrected Jesus, rather than asking how they thought his resurrection took place. In our survey we have found that a wide range of ideas regarding Jesus death and resurrection existed. Relying on the theory of counterintuitiveness, we can now move beyond the observation that the concept of the resurrected Jesus was cognitively plausible, and compare different versions of this concept with each other.[41]

If we apply the experimental results outlined in the previous section to the different views about the resurrected Jesus, we can hypothesise that concepts that minimally violated ontological expectations (minimally counterintuitive beliefs) were better remembered and more easily transmitted than merely intuitive concepts or concepts that violated such ontological expectations excessively. Early Christian views that Jesus was only a human being and was not resurrected (in body) accommodated Jesus' figure to the ontological expectations about human beings. However wise, heroic, pure, and exceptional such a Jesus might have been, such a concept was certainly

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[41] Cf. I. Czachesz, 'Kontraintuitive Ideen im frühchristlichen Denken', in G. Theißen & P. von Gemünden (eds.), *Erkennen und Erleben: Beiträge zur psychologischen Erforschung der urchristlichen Religion*, Gütersloh, forthcoming.

disadvantaged in the chain of memorisations and recalls. It will have been either subject to distortions and oblivion, or have been gradually transformed into a more memorable image.

Let us now consider the idea of Jesus' death and resurrection as presented in 1 Cor. 15 and explicated in the four canonical gospels. In this narrative scheme, whereas Jesus dies a violent death, it is not different from the violent deaths of many other humans at his time. Three days after his death, however, he is resurrected by God and seen by several eyewitnesses. It is important to remark that we are not evaluating here the supposed experience of the people who have seen Jesus, but the *story* of Jesus being alive and appearing to people. In this narrative, it is Jesus' ambiguous physical existence that violates the ontological category of 'human being'. Humans are supposed to have solid bodies that are visible at all times. As we have seen, the violation of these expectations is rather frequent in human thought. The subjects in Bering's experiment expected that dead agents cease to have psychobiological and perceptual states, whereas they continue to have emotions, desires, and epistemic states. Like other ghosts and spirits, Jesus receives an ambiguous physical substance after his resurrection. The gospel narratives make more of his counterintuitive physics when he suddenly appears before his disciples in a house with closed doors, or disappears from them in the middle of a conversation (e.g. Luke 24:31; John 20:19, 26). All of these events, however, are fully consistent with his ambiguous physical state and do not differ from the abilities of ghosts to walk through walls.

In light of the cognitive explanation of Jesus' post-resurrection experiences, we can also comment on the different endings of Mark's Gospel. The Gospel in its shortest form ends with the story of the young man in white robe who is sitting in the empty tomb and explains to the women looking for Jesus' body that he has risen, and sends them back (with Peter and the disciples) to Galilee, where they would see him (Mark 16:1-8). This account contains only vague references to Jesus' counterintuitive

existence. It can be argued that the so-called longer ending (16:9-20)[42] was added to the narrative because it emphasises the minimally counterintuitive (ghost-like) nature of the risen Jesus, and thereby forms a cognitively more appealing, more memorable account of the resurrection.

The 'Docetic' Jesus, in turn, violates ontological intuitions in more than one ways. In the *Acts of John*, Jesus is in a cave on the Mount of Olives, talking with John, at the same time that he is being crucified on Golgotha. Being at two places at the same time is obviously counterintuitive. But the Jesus on the Mount of Olives does other things that violate ontological expectations: he radiates light, becomes invisible while speaking to John, and finally ascends to heaven. Besides being at two places simultaneously, his two 'exemplars' have two different minds as well: the one in the cave does not feel the sufferings of the one on Golgotha. The concept of Jesus' death and resurrection in the *Acts of John* is not minimally counterintuitive and is therefore disadvantaged as compared with the standard account of the New Testament. The view that Jesus exchanged his appearance with that of Simon of Cyrene (see above) is a simplified version of this account, and may illustrate how the original concept has been changed to approximate the optimal level of counterintuitive ingredients. In this case, both Jesus and Simon violate ontological expectations once (being able to change their appearance), provided that no other violations occurred in the narrative, the details of which are unknown to us. To explain why this version is still not optimal, we have to remember the experiments of Naronzayan and Atran, who examined the survival of belief sets rather than of individual items. They found that the most successful belief sets mainly included intuitive items. It seems that the story of a counterintuitive Jesus is

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[42] For the date of this addition, see B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*, Stuttgart 1971, 125; J.A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, Tübingen 2000, 234-244.

better remembered when accompanied by an 'ordinary' Simon of Cyrene, rather than by a counterintuitive one.

Consequently, the 'standard' view of Jesus' death and resurrection, which is incorporated in most of the New Testament writings, was more successful than its competitors (such as Ebionite and Docetic versions) because it was more memorable. The wider circulation and greater appeal of such narratives might have strengthened the authority of the writings which were based on such ideas, supported their inclusion in the New Testament, whereas other texts were deemed to the status of apocryphal literature.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed why Jesus' resurrection is a psychologically plausible concept, and why a particular view of the resurrected Jesus became established rather than other ideas that were present in early Christianity. First, widespread human feelings about the dead made the idea appealing that Jesus continued to exist in some form after he had died. Second, early Christians integrated Jesus' presence into the archaic cognitive framework of intentional agency, and relied on this idea as they interpreted various events in their lives. Finally, a minimally counterintuitive image of the resurrected Jesus emerged and became established in early Christian tradition.[43]