DOSSIER

Shared rituals and religious beliefs

Rituais compartilhados e crenças religiosas

Daniel De Luca-Noronha[1]

ABSTRACT

Agents are generally committed to performing actions based on religious beliefs, even when these are not obviously adaptive. What could explain this fact? The cognitivist hypothesis explains this commitment on the basis of internal cognitive mechanisms. But some have noted the importance of taking into consideration the contexts in which religious beliefs are transmitted, such as rituals: the cultural learner commits herself to a given religious belief when she witnesses displays based on that belief in appropriate situations. In this paper, I argue that we can strengthen this insight by focusing on the shared character of the rituals that facilitate religious belief transmission. First, I present the traditional explanatory hypothesis regarding the origins of religious belief. Second, I sketch three objections that put limits to that model's explanatory power. Third, I explore a hypothesis which accounts for the context of belief transmission and then argue for the necessity of refining it so as to accommodate pertinent explanatory demands. Finally, I present the interactionist model of social cognition as a way to account for the shared character of religious rituals.

Keywords: religious belief, religious commitment, social cognition, interactionism, rituals.

RESUMO

Agentes estão geralmente comprometidos a agir com base em crenças religiosas, mesmo quando estas não são obviamente adaptativas. O que poderia explicar esse fato? A hipótese cognitivista explica esse comprometimento com base em mecanismos cognitivos internos. No entanto, alguns teóricos têm notado a importância de se levar em consideração os contextos nos quais crenças religiosas são transmitidas, tais como os rituais: o aprendiz cultural se compromete com certa crença religiosa quando testemunha manifestações baseadas em tal crença em situações apropriadas. Nesse artigo, argumento que podemos fortalecer esse insight ao nos concentrarmos no caráter compartilhado dos rituais que facilitam a transmissão de crenças religiosas. Primeiro, apresento a hipótese explicativa tradicional para as origens da crença religiosa. Segundo, esboço três objeções que limitam o poder de tal modelo explicativo. Terceiro, exploro uma hipótese que dá conta do contexto de transmissão de crenças e, então, defendo a necessidade de refiná-la para acomodar demandas explicativas pertinentes. Finalmente, apresento o modelo interacionista da cognição social como um modo de dar conta do caráter compartilhado dos rituais religiosos.

Palavras-chave: crença religiosa, comprometimento religioso, cognição social, interacionismo, rituais.

[1] Faculdade Jesuíta de Filosofia e Teologia. Av. Doutor Cristiano Guimarães, 2127, Planalto, 31720-300, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil. E-mail: deluca.11@gmail.com

The question of religious belief

In the last decades, religious beliefs have been investigated as natural phenomena by researchers belonging to the cognitive sciences. One of the aspects of religious belief that begs for explanation is its causal power to transform the lives of believers. The central problem in explaining this lies in the fact that religious beliefs do not have always an obvious adaptive value. In fact, we can be attuned to the physical world without them. On the other hand, we cannot be attuned to the world without empirical beliefs. Accordingly, it would be expected that religious belief, unlike empirical belief, would be just a whim of our cognition. However, this does not seem to be the case. Religious beliefs are widespread in the world population (Hackett *et al.*, 2012). These considerations lead to the following problem: even if religious beliefs do not have adaptive value, believers are typically committed to them. How can we explain this fact?

A well-known explanatory hypothesis takes into account human social cognitive capacities (Atran and Norenzayan, 2004; Barrett, 2004; Boyer, 2003). Let us call this the cognitivist hypothesis. It explores the human social capacity to detect intentionality. According to research in social cognition, human beings from a very early age are responsive to the intentional behavior of their conspecifics (Woodward, 2009). Within the framework of modularity theories, it can be said that human beings are equipped from birth with a hyperactive agency detection device (HADD) (Baron-Cohen, 1995). This module is activated not only by proper intentional behavior but also by a vast set of stimuli, including physical ones that only seem like intentional phenomena and are so interpreted.

Following this line of reasoning, religious beliefs would be a collateral effect or by-product of this cognitive activity. Specifically, they would result from a violation of part of our default intuitive ontology, an ontology to which we are committed because of the way that our mind works (Boyer, 2000). In so far as this violation occurs through an inclusion of agential traits, religious beliefs become salient. For instance, consider the difference between the belief that trees are inanimate objects, on the one hand, and the belief that trees are sacred objects because they can listen to what people say in their vicinity, on the other hand (James, 1988). It is not difficult to conceive the belief that trees are inanimate objects as implicit or not salient. This is because that belief seems well accommodated in our core assumptions about the physical world. However, the belief that trees can listen violates that assumption.

This kind of violation is one of the sources of explanations for a belief's salience. Moreover, this belief belongs to the set of stimuli that activates our tracking of intentionality. In this vein, religious belief involves commitment to actions because of its minimally counterintuitive character. Another example is a belief in a being who possesses mental states without a body. In sum, the adherent character of religious belief

is a by-product of social cognitive capacities. This hypothesis could explain the reason why believers are committed to a variety of counterintuitive beliefs, including religious ones.

Objections to the traditional model

Recently, some criticisms of the traditional model have emerged, suggesting limits to its explanatory power. First, traces of religious practice are more recent (100kya) than the estimates of the emergence of our ability to detect agency (Sterelny, 2017). According to this historical record, our capacity of social cognition, here conceived as HADD, is not a sufficient condition for the emergence of religious belief, even though belief is understood as a byproduct of this cognitive activity. Other elements besides this inner capacity must be taken into account in the explanation.

Second, a minimally counterintuitive content of religious belief can be memorable even without a commitment to actions in accordance with that belief. There is a difference between a memorable content, on the one hand, and a content that causes a commitment to actions, on the other. For instance, a content such as "a mouse that is able to speak" is memorable. However, that content does not involve the kind of commitment related to religious belief (Atran and Henrich, 2010; Boyer, 2001). Similarly, supernatural entities engender action-guiding beliefs for those who believe in the corresponding doctrine, but not for outsiders. Thus, entities of Greek mythology like Zeus and Pandora may have led to action-guiding beliefs among those who lived in ancient Greece, but not among those who live in other cultures (Willard *et al.*, 2016). Even so, these entities can be memorable to anyone.

Third, the explanation of commitment related to religious belief needs to take more basic states of mind, such as emotions, into account. The commitment to a religious belief depends, to a large extent, on the type of emotional involvement that it causes. Research on this subject reports that the transmission of a religious belief will be even stronger if it arouses emotions like fear and joy (Pyysiäinen, 2001). And, in cases of transmission of religious belief, a feeling of trust towards the other agent must be present in order to bring about actions accordingly. Emotional states, however, are more basic than cognitive ones.

These objections have motivated the search for other explanatory elements that account for the above *explananda*. One way to accomplish this is to pay attention to the role of contexts in the transmission of religious belief, not only taking into account the mind/brain functions that operate internally, but also the way in which these interactive contexts modulate or enrich the stimuli related to religious belief and experience. As we will see, we need to explore these contexts to understand the commitment associated with religious belief. I will now turn to one such attempt to make sense of the *explananda*.

Credibility-enhancing displays

The first step in exploring the role of context in commitment to religious beliefs is to take into account the process of transmission of information among human beings. As is known, the acquisition of information from the physical as well as the social environment is an essential aspect of the adaptive process in many species, and sociability is more markedly a characteristic in the human species. This aspect is due to the peculiar mode by which human beings identify with their conspecifics (Tomasello and Vaish, 2013). This identification involves understanding others as intentional beings, that is, as beings whose behavior and attention are directed toward certain ends.

Understanding others as intentional beings allows stable and flexible engagement in sociogenetic processes that give rise to complex artifacts and cultural practices. In this manner, the cognitive capacities of human beings not only result in a unified biological inheritance but also in a variety of ontogenetic processes (Tomasello, 1999). With these considerations in view, it is clear that the contexts of information acquisition and, in particular, the context of acquisition of religious belief are central for understanding the adherence to religious belief and the commitment it engenders.

For our purposes, it is important to call attention to the following fact: human beings' identification with their conspecifics allows, in particular, that the learner *trust* their conspecifics from whom they acquire relevant information. According to Joseph Henrich (2009), a feeling of trust in relation to others must be present for a human being to acquire information from them, especially when the learner is not in a position to be able to judge the information being transmitted. Moreover, that feeling is a part of what makes cooperation and social cohesion possible within human groups. For example, the process of information acquisition among humans requires a sensibility for distinguishing believable humans from deceptive ones. The absence of trust in relation to others explains the employment of sanctions and exclusion towards deceptive members of the group as well as free-riders (Henrich, 2009).

Trust can help explain commitment to religious beliefs, especially those that encode information for the acquisition of which one has to rely on testimony. How can we better understand the feeling of trust involved in the formation of religious beliefs? A key concept here is Henrich's notion of credibility-enhancing displays (CREDs) (Henrich, 2009). For Henrich, the transmission of information culminates in commitment when learners perceive the actions of others that are consistent with the representational content of the beliefs in question. In this perspective, a prescription of a given kind of action will engender less commitment on the part of the learner if said prescription is not accompanied by CREDs on the part of the one prescribing. In one of Henrich's examples, the display of eating a blue mushroom is a CRED for the verbal prescription that eating blue mushrooms is not dangerous

to one's health. In the absence of CREDs, it is less probable that learners will commit themselves to the set of behaviors entailed by commitment to the belief in question. Thus, according to Henrich's hypothesis, the observation of actions that conform to a belief's representational content is bound to make said agent believable and enhance the belief's credibility and, hence, its capacity to generate commitment on the part of the learner. A prototypical context in which this occurs is the religious ritual. In these contexts, religious belief will be adherent in proportion to the amount and impact of CREDs to which learners are subjected. For instance, consider a novice to whom one communicates that certain objects are sacred and that, being sacred, they must be touched. According to the hypothesis at hand, this belief will generate commitment when the learner observes other people touching sacred objects.

Can Henrich's CREDs hypothesis answer the objections to the traditional model? Generally speaking, by pointing to the contexts of belief transmission, the model seems apt to handle the demands of each objection. First, we can understand the reason why cognitive mechanisms for detecting intentionality are not sufficient to explain the origin of religious belief. The point is that such mechanisms depend on appropriate interactive contexts for the relevant by-product to arise. Second, the presence or absence of such contexts of belief transmission explains the difference between a merely memorable content, on the one hand, and a content that generates the kind of adherence and commitment typical of religious belief, on the other. The absence of appropriate contexts can explain the reason why certain religious beliefs exhibit cultural variation with respect to their adherence. Third, religious initiation rituals and their sacred atmosphere are situations enveloped in strong emotions (Fuller, 2008). I will come back to this point, but it is worth noting that this is an important aspect of contexts of religious belief transmission. It is likely that markedly less emotive contexts result in a lack of engagement (Atran, 2002).

Let us sum up what has been touched upon until this point. We started with the cognitivist hypothesis that the adherence of beliefs is a collateral effect of internal cognitive mechanisms that operate mandatorily. That hypothesis, however, has been shown to lack explanatory power when faced with three main objections we have sketched. As we have just seen, one way to account for the objections is Henrich's CREDs hypothesis which takes into account contextual or external aspects in the acquisition of beliefs. I am confident that these considerations are the right way forward. However, I argue that to fully respond to the objections faced by the cognitivist model, the CREDs hypothesis has to be refined if we wish to sketch an explanatory account that is coherent enough to accommodate the cognitivist model. Is it possible to integrate both internal cognitive factors and external contextual factors?

Evidently, this is an extensive topic that cannot be exhausted here. My aim is more modest: in the remainder of this paper, I intend to extract important consequences from the CRED's hypothesis for understanding the role of social

cognition with respect to the transmission of religious belief. The question with which I will occupy myself going forward is: how can we better understand the role of context in the observation of CREDs? What is there in contexts of successful religious belief transmission that results in commitment?

Note that emphasizing the consequences of the detection of CREDs does not immediately imply an understanding of the context. Actually, there are at least two circumstances in which an agent can observe another behaving as a religious believer without that observation resulting in any kind of commitment whatsoever. In the first case, consider an observer who takes on a theoretical stance of mere intellectual curiosity towards a certain religious practice and is an external observer with a point of view that is not swayed by the relevant interactions. Thus, she may be sensitive to CREDs without that sensitivity having any repercussions on her own behavior. In the second case, consider an outsider who observes the practice of a certain culture or subculture which seems exotic or picturesque to her. It may be that the observation of such a practice, conforming to the content of certain beliefs, will be memorable to her. But, once again, this observation has a low chance of causing commitment to the relevant belief or set of beliefs. In sum, simply emphasizing the role of the observer of CREDs is a strategy that can be absorbed by the cognitivist model. Thus, to show that the CREDs hypothesis answers the above mentioned explanatory demands, we need to test this hypothesis by investigating actual situations which give rise to the transmission of religious beliefs.

How can the role of context enrich the hypothesis so that it meets the explanatory demands at hand? In a word, the context must be *shared*. This requires that the learner not only take on the role of an observer but of a participant in an interaction. The point here is that an agent can be present in a situation rife with CREDs without thereby becoming engaged with others in an episode of joint attention. The mere fact of being spatially next to participants in a religious practice is not sufficient to make one share in that situation. But commitment to religious beliefs depends on just that kind of sharing. That is, an agent becomes committed to religious beliefs only when she is a participant in shared situations. The question that will occupy us below is how exactly shared situations exert their power in generating such commitment.

It is likely that this point is acknowledged by CREDs theorists. However, I maintain that fully recognizing the importance of participating in shared situations requires a specific model of social cognition that not only relies on internal mechanisms but also accommodates the engagement of agents in interactive contexts. As I will argue in the rest of this paper, once we work under such a model of social cognition we can reinforce the CREDs model.

Interactionism

We have seen the importance of taking into account external situations for understanding the commitment to religious beliefs, an issue that undermines the explanatory power of the cognitivist model since cognitivism is predominantly preoccupied with what goes on inside the minds of agents considered in isolation. Moreover, we have seen that the CREDs hypothesis requires an explanation of the context of acquisition and transmission that facilitates commitment. A step in this direction is to ground explanation in a model of social cognition that can accommodate interactive contexts.

Interactionism is a well-known stance in social cognition research (De Jaegher, 2009; Smith, 2010; Zahavi, 2011; Krueger, 2012). It is a development of extended cognition, according to which cognitive processes are not confined to the inside of people's skulls but extend to the body and the environment (Noë, 2004; Clark and Chalmers, 1998). In contexts of social cognition, the outside of one's mind does not only include the physical environment but, markedly, also other agents. The approach of extended social cognition tries to account for dynamic relations between agents and the environment—situations in which social cognition is pervasive. The investigation thus moves from what goes on inside an agent's individual mind to include the mode by which dynamic inter-relations between embodied minds and the environment directly affect the social-cognitive capacities of agents (Fuchs and De Jaegher, 2009).

Of course, traditional theories do not necessarily prescind from taking interactions into account. However, precisely because they focus on the internal workings of the mind, interactions seem like afterthoughts. On the other hand, in applications of extended cognition to social cognition, interactions or "embodied practices" come first. The central idea is that social cognition is in large part dependent on embodied minds in active connection. That is, differently from the stance of passive observers who receive and process social inputs, interactionism sees social cognition as primordially dependent on the online engagement of agents in interactive situations (Gallagher, 2008).

What justifies the focus on the intersubjective is the idea that social interaction involves a coupling between two or more agents which is regulated by elements pertinent to the interaction. The notion of coupling means to make it clear that the constitutive aspects of these interactions do not simply result from the cognitive activity of each individual agent's mind taken in isolation. Such aspects are emerging products of the interaction itself: the agents are embedded in a dynamic inter-relation, connected by a set of reciprocal reactions and bodily movements. Thus, Froese and Fuchs affirm:

> This creates a circular interplay of expressions and reactions running in split seconds and constantly modifying each partner's bodily state, in a process that becomes highly autonomous and is not directly controlled by partners. They have become parts of a dynamic sensorimotor and inter-affective system that connects both bodies by reciprocal movements and reactions, that means, in inter-bodily resonance (2012, p. 213).

With respect to these interactions, interactionism calls attention to the difference between the point of view of a participant in an interaction and the external point of view of an observer (Strawson, 2008). The central claim of interactionism is that when an agent is engaged in a situation of co-presence she has direct access to the mind of another agent. This is due to the fact that the relevant mental states for the interaction are directly expressed in the actions of agents in situations of co-presence. To this end, niches have an important role. As Kim Sterelny (2003) notes, agents are surrounded by symbolic artifacts which, when shared, allow direct access to the mind of another. The artifacts mediate interactions and may facilitate the monitoring of other minds. An observer who merely observes interactions like these would have to rely on Theory of Mind or high-level simulation to access other minds. In such a case, the observer would not be able to take advantage of common goals and shared objects that make up interactive situations.

When interactions in shared situations are highlighted, it becomes clear that passive or disengaged observation is not the norm when one is dealing with cases of religious belief transmission. The prototypical context of religious belief transmission is, after all, the ritual, which is a situation importantly marked by episodes of joint attention and action in which agents share common goals and objects. Thus, to explain the kind of commitment associated with religious belief, our focus finally turns to these kinds of situations.

Rituals as shared situations

The idea of rituals as shared situations has been advanced by researchers such as Randall Collins (2004) and Harvey Whitehouse (1995). Shared situations are situations of *openness* in which two or more agents share perceptual attention and coordinate actions directed toward common ends. This kind of situation differs from situations in which agents are looking at the same object, but are not aware of this perceptual convergence, as well as from situations in which only one agent is aware that she and the other agent are looking at the same object. In shared situations, agents share attention and are aware of this to some extent.

Consider the following situation: Max is being initiated into a ritual by Claire. Max does not passively observe Claire's behavior. Claire urges Max to act in conjunction with her. Thus, Max and Claire act together, that is, the set of actions they both perform is not simply the sum of their isolated actions. This is because the action of each of the agents is responsive to the action of the other, i.e., to their expectations related to how the other agent will act given their shared ends. In this situation, the agents make a series of short-term mutual adjustments, such as the synchronization of movements, mutual following of the gaze, rapid detection of what is perceptually shared in the environment, calculation of perspectives, and so on (Schmidt and Richardson, 2008).

For our purposes, it is important to highlight two levels of sharing. At the most basic level, there is a reciprocal synchronization of the movements between Max and Claire. Max and Claire experience body feedback sequences. This synchrony is often unconscious and occurs even in relation to unintentional bodily phenomena (Lakin and Chartrand, 2003). Claire's pointing at an object gives rise to a head movement by Max, which in turn leads him to take the object in Claire's hands, and so on. Here both agents track and mutually correct perceptual attention. It should be noted that in this interactive situation there is an interdependence of the control of perceptual attention. Each agent mobilizes their perceptual attention based on the choices of the other, or on their expectations about the choices of the other agent. The control of perceptual attention by each agent is related to the control of the other. Here, Claire's movements affect and, at the same time, are affected by Max's movements.

At a higher level, Max and Claire share relevant mental states and, moreover, they are aware of this sharing. This awareness must be present because both agents can see the same object without being aware of this perceptual convergence, as we have seen above. In this case, the situation is not shared. It is precisely the mutual awareness of the situation itself that allows the set of mutual adjustments along the coordination of actions. Thus, sharing actions involves not only synchronizing intentional movements or actions. It also involves sharing higher-order mental states.

These two levels of sharing result in what Collins (2004) calls "collective effervescence", characterized, among other things, by feelings of confidence, exaltation, strength, and enthusiasm to engage in ritualistic practices. In addition, such collective effervescence also results in feelings of belonging, as well as a sense of moral correctness in belonging to the group. Finally, it involves differentiating between who is part of the group and who is an outsider. The key point here is that sharing a ritualistic situation amplifies the intensity of emotions, in particular, the feeling of trust in the other agent (Boothby *et al.*, 2014). As we have seen, it is the feeling of trust that, according to the CREDs hypothesis, is essential in the type of engagement associated with the transmission of religious belief. It is precisely this type of feeling that, when shared, may explain the commitment to perform actions in conformity to religious beliefs.

To return to our example, consider now that Max and Claire are both involved in the Christian rite of the Eucharist and that their joint attention is pervaded by emotions. They mutually detect their facial expressions and gestures and walk together towards communion. They look at each other and smile. We can say that Max and Claire share the same emotional state (for example, the state of wonder). This emotional state of mind manifests itself directly in the behavior of both Max and Claire. It should be noted that the set of reactions of both agents throughout this episode of co-presence depends precisely on this sharing. Put another way, if they were not in a shared situation, they probably would not react in the way that they react. From interactionism, we can understand

emotion, among other mental states, less as a merely internal and intracranial process than as a multisensory, external and relational state of mind (Van der Löwe and Parkinson, 2014). In this case, two agents may be in the same emotional state and somehow be aware of it. In short, this sharing, marked by different levels of feedback cycles, reinforces the intensity of the mental states in question.

So how can the above considerations refine the CREDs hypothesis, making it better equipped to handle the explanatory challenges it faces? As we have seen, agents can be co-present in a ritual without being in a situation of sharing. In this case, it is improbable that it will result in commitment to the relevant religious belief and ensuing actions, even when the mechanism of detection of intentionality has been activated. But, at this juncture, we are able to handle this issue. What reinforces the mode by which two or more agents experience rituals are the feedback cycles that result from their being in the same emotional, attentional, and cognitive state. The feeling of trust that results from this, in turn, aids in the explanation of the fact that, over time, learners commit themselves to acting on the basis of religious beliefs.

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