

“Baptizing . . . and Teaching”: Ritual and Religious Knowledge in Early Christianity

Although rituals can reasonably be analyzed as actions producing effects, without paying attention to their symbolic meaning or role as instruments of religious teaching, early Christianity provides abundant examples of interactions between ritual practices and the transmission of religious knowledge: the development of the catechumenate, the use of books in liturgical contexts, preaching and worship, prayer, the formation of the Christian calendar etc. This paper elaborates and assesses three recent theoretical perspectives on ritual’s capacity to consolidate religious beliefs. These are theories focusing on (1) memory research (Whitehouse; Czachesz); 2) the idea that rituals create common knowledge (Chwe, Pyysiäinen); and 3) the hypothesis that rituals function as credibility enhancing displays (Henrich). The paper argues that these three perspectives, memory, communication, and cultural learning, can be integrated into one model by means of which the role of rituals in the spread early Christian beliefs can be analyzed.