

Neurophysiological Effects of Musical Participation: The Power of Musical Ritual & Metaphor in Early Christianity

This paper will explore the significance of musical ritual in relation to the success of early Christianity as a socio-religious movement through the use of cognitive theory and neuroscience. Musical practice is almost ubiquitous in religious traditions but it plays an extremely significant role in the formation of early Christian identities. Song and melody function in several important ways in a social context (ie. Pedagogy, Rhetoric, Persuasion, etc.) but they also work at other levels of influence. Music plays a meaningful role in the formation of group identity, the creation of internal and external social boundaries, and eliciting certain types of emotional responses from participants. Early Christian authorities such as Ignatius of Antioch urged that congregations sing in unison while 3rd century bishop Clement of Alexandria recognized the emotive power of song when he argued that certain melodies were unacceptable because of their ability to “arouse the passions”. Other types of melody were not only acceptable but in fact encouraged. Song was a historically legitimate form of worship in Judaism and music, more generally, was woven into the fabric of Greco-Roman antiquity such that it would have been almost unthinkable to prohibit all forms of musical expression despite the inherent “dangers” of musical participation as articulated by Clement. Cognitive science can help explain (at least in part) how group formation in early Christianity was successful through the employment of musical practice and how identity and social bonding were strengthened via musical ritual.