

## **Two Stars and a (Fourth) Wish: Ritual Theory and the Challenges of Fusing Humanity. A commentary on *Three Wishes for the World* by Harvey Whitehouse**

Jonathan Lanman

*Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queen's University Belfast*

There is much to admire in Whitehouse's ambitious programme of research. There is the testing of a theory that offers greater precision in describing and explaining social cohesion. There is the formulation of an account of psychological kinship that can serve as a reminder that cultural and evolutionary approaches can work together to produce compelling insights. And there is the sense that, with such interdisciplinary collaboration, we stand on the verge of unprecedented progress in understanding the human condition. Yet, while we can appreciate Whitehouse's three wishes for the world, the move from descriptive to normative discourse faces significant ethical and practical challenges, necessitating a fourth wish.

Whitehouse's essay makes clear that the theory of divergent modes of religiosity (Whitehouse 2001; 2004) is not so much a theory of religion but of social cohesion, and has important implications beyond organizations employing non-physical agent concepts, such as civil war armed groups (Whitehouse and McQuinn 2013). Sharing traumatic experiences forges intense bonds through psychological kinship while frequent repetition of semantic information produces less intense but more diffuse bonds of ethnic or pseudo-ethnic affiliation. This is progress both for the theory itself and for the field of the cognitive science of religion in that one of its theories has demonstrated a much wider significance for our understanding of societies.

We often speak of the necessity and benefits of interdisciplinarity in the study of human life, but we also often face entrenched disciplinary boundaries and antipathy (Pinker 2002; McKinnon and Silverman 2005). Whitehouse's account of identity fusion as 'psychological kinship' (Swann et al 2012), which lies at the heart of the imagistic mode of cohesion (Lanman and Whitehouse in prep), utilizes the findings of both evolutionary psychology and socio-cultural anthropology and can serve as a reminder of the insights we can reach when we move past the more exclusionist rhetoric sometimes used by scholars in these fields.

Evolutionary psychologists have provided evidence of the importance of contextual cues, especially early co-residence, in the psychological perception of kinship and the altruistic dispositions that follow (Lieberman, Tooby et al. 2007;

*Corresponding author's e-mail:* jonlanman@gmail.com

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Lieberman and Lobel 2012). Socio-cultural anthropologists have provided evidence of the construction of kinship ties through specific contextual processes, such as shared residence and eating (Carsten 2004). The available evidence from both fields tells us that human beings use fallible heuristic cues to determine likely genetic relatives for the purposes of altruism and incest avoidance. Whitehouse's insight is that traumatic rituals can provide these cues and produce in participants the impression that they share essential parts of themselves with other people; they can effectively make kin and they can do so in a much shorter timespan than co-residence. If this claim is borne out by ongoing research, we will have demonstrated that insights of frequently opposed fields can be utilized together to make substantial progress in understanding one of the foundational topics of anthropology.

With such progress in our understanding of the human condition, however, come important questions about the uses of such understanding. Whitehouse presents a relatively uncomplicated and optimistic picture with his three wishes. Once we understand how social glue operates among human beings, we will be able to defuse violent movements and fuse billions of people with the notion of 'humanity', allowing us to solve the problems of poverty and climate change. I can appreciate this vision but I believe that anytime one seeks to follow Marx in not just understanding the world but changing it (not to mention changing it for all of humanity!), one must face serious questions and challenges. Whitehouse argues : "The more we understand these mechanisms the more we can do to curtail sectarian violence, genocide, and many other forms of civil conflict." This assumes a 'we' that judges which civil wars to put down and which to support. Who is included in this 'we'? How representative of the diverse moral visions of humanity will 'we' be? How worthy of trust?

Similarly, Whitehouse argues that it would be beneficial for people to fuse with the concept of "humanity" as a whole. "Humanity" is a relatively recent and universalizing identity term that potentially devalues existing ethnic and religious identities, identities that both activists and many socio-cultural anthropologists view themselves as championing in a fight against globalization and cultural homogenization. What is the content of this vision of 'humanity' with which people are to fuse? What is it to be a human being? Who has a seat at the table in deciding the content of this vision? If we unreflectively assume the contemporary idealistic Western notion of humanity as a rational species working toward a world of individual freedom and mutual benefit (Taylor 2007), then other visions of humanity and its place in the world are marginalized. We must be careful to demonstrate the differences between such a project and the enterprises of colonialism and the neo-liberal push of global capitalism, not just for obvious ethical reasons but also for the practical reason that socio-cultural anthropologists

are needed for cross-cultural research on the topics addressed here and one risks alienating many of them with a vision of global transformation and unification.

For these reasons I would ask Whitehouse to consider asking the genie for a fourth wish. This wish would be to make the process of establishing the content of our vision of 'humanity' globally peaceful, representative, and consensual. This, however, may be the hardest wish for our genie to grant.

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