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Anna Collar (2013) *Religious networks in the Roman Empire: The Spread of New Ideas.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. hbk. 315pp+index. ISBN: 978-1-107-04344-2

BOOK REVIEW

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The Justin Bieber hairstyle continues to make the news. The pop singer's regular reinterpretations of his locks secure media attention and excite his myriad fans, some of whom dutifully transpose his hairdo onto theirs. Now, for all its triteness, that is a clear and physical manifestation of the spread of new ideas.

Anna Collar's book makes for engrossing reading: in it, she helps us to understand how such 'memes' – discrete elements of a culture, or system of behaviour – including more serious ones than hairstyles, get circulated and accepted. Reading her book helps the reader become somewhat more familiar with a basic quandary in social life and mass communication, and a touchstone for the study of social impact and control. Why, of so many new ideas sprouting everywhere and all the time, do such a few catch fire and (in modern Facebook parlance) "go viral"? Not only that but, beyond the immediacy of their initial burst of novelty and interest, how do such ideas actually settle down and become mainstreamed into contemporary society? The search for valid answers to this "mysterious phenomenon" of social contagion – as Collar quotes Dostoyevsky in her opening sentences (p. 1) – has not only gripped engaged scholars but also actual and aspiring fashion designers, brand managers, marketing gurus, epidemiologists and politicians, and for obvious reasons.

Susan Blackmore has already proposed the study of 'memetics' as a science of idea and behaviour replication, doing so largely using a psychological approach redolent of genetic determinism. In *The Meme Machine* (1999), she follows the lead of Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In that pioneering book, Dawkins coins the term 'meme' to stand for a 'unit' of human cultural evolution comparable to the gene, suggesting that such selfish replication may also model human culture, albeit in a different sense.

Collar takes this topic forward, using a different (and less deterministic) approach, grounded in a disciplinary blend of archaeology, (actor) network theory, the sociology of religion, but also physics, mathematics and computer science. She brings to bear her intimate knowledge of the Roman Empire and its religious practices, weaving a compelling and credible narrative of how such an empire – with its loose interpretation of religion as a concern for and with ritual (rather than for/with belief) – was fertile ground for a whole wave of alternative, often competing theologies and eschatologies, arriving in different epochs from its extensive border regions. She postulates that “informational cascade” (p. 19) relies on two complementary dynamics: the first is vulnerability, a proneness to new ideas; the second is connectedness, a disposition to be linked to others, and be members of ‘networks’ via “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1983) which, however, transcend the local. To tie these potentially problematic loose ends together, Collar resorts to an anthropology of epithets: inscriptions on tombstones and other material monuments.

The result is a grounded and materialist, ‘bottom up’ assessment of what others, like Richard Neibuhr, postulated largely theoretically in their work on the difference between and transitions from sect, to denomination, and then to mainstream church (Neibuhr, 1954). It is not just an epigraphic study but an ethnographic one, looking at how texts on monuments speak out as affirmations of belief, conviction and affiliation, frozen in time and space. The speed and extent with which such epithets spoke of particular cults can be taken as circumstantial evidence of the rates of adoption of such religious ideas in far-flung corners of the Roman empire. Where such ideas? were adopted by the Roman officer class, with its high social status, there the cult was liable to spread, facilitated by the “highly communicative military network” (p. 79) in which they invariably operated: the extraordinary roads and bridges built to facilitate rapid deployment and movement were also the communications infrastructure for the dissemination of ideas, both across armies and beyond, spilling over onto (non-military) civilians via the influence of traders, rabbis/priests and influential local leaders. Proximal Point Analysis (PPA) offers a rich visual mapping of the spread of such ideas, identifying hubs, and bringing to light the network that permitted such a distribution to unfold, and doing so over a range of successive time periods. This exercise is done specifically with respect to the pagan cult of Jupiter Dolichenus (from 1st Century BC to AD 300) in Chapter 3, diasporic Judaism and Hebraisation after the Bar Kokhba Revolt of AD 132 in Chapter 4, and the hybrid pagan-Judaic cult of Zeus/Theos Hypsistos (from the Hellenistic period to the 3rd Century AD) in Chapter 5.

One cannot but sympathise with the author who admits that “the data that archaeologists and ancient historians must use is often fragmentary, obscure and biased, and is subject to the whim of chance” (p. 287). Interpretative methodologies are, therefore, invariably called for. Collar offers us networks as an explanatory variable to the rise and adoption of new religious ideas, and offers us epithets as testimony of the impact and scope of such networks. Networks are certainly being used in the modern internet world: it is how Facebook determines that you may wish to connect with someone and become his/her friend, just because you may already share one or more friends.

Perhaps this is part of the problem of this line of argument: Collar is implicitly attributing ancient societies with the mechanics of contemporary communication drivers, and this assumes that the past may mirror the present in, say, the spread and adoption of new ideas. Secondly, one wonders whether the analysis proposed fails to take proper account of other religious cults, like that of Mithras, which originated far beyond the confines of the Roman Empire, and nevertheless found a foothold even in Rome itself. Would the mechanisms of transmission have been similar to those reviewed in this book? And, if so, then how (and why) would one religious ‘meme’ have superseded or upended another one? And lastly, does the author do proper justice to discussions on the ‘velocity’ and suddenness of adoption and dissemination; in other words, how and why would one religious idea travel faster or slower than another one, assuming they were riding on similar communication networks?

All in all, Collar’s impressive volume raises more questions than it answers: but perhaps that is exactly what a good book should do. *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire* regales us with a powerfully trans-disciplinary account of a vitally important transmission mechanism – the spread and adoption of new religious ideas – with scores of fairly mundane epithets commandeered to serve as the evidence. The methodology thus proposed lends itself and beckons further analysis; possibly even including Justin Bieber’s hairstyle fluctuations.

References

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