

Neurobiology and Manuscript Cultures: The Evolution of Premodern Religious and Cosmological Systems

Lecture given in the Columbia University Seminar on Religion and Writing, 25 Sept. 2012

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Abstract

This talk reviews recent advances in neurobiology and philology that suggest novel approaches to studies of the evolution of premodern religious systems. The talk begins by discussing neurodevelopmental models that help explain the ubiquity in early cultures of primitive anthropomorphic spirits and deities. It then reviews a list of predictable effects that centuries of repetitive exegetical methods imposed on the structural evolution of religious and cosmological systems in manuscript cultures. Neurobiology here again factors in by imposing limits on the exegetical methods of premodern reciters, scribes, and commentators, which cross-cultural studies in the 1990s showed were closely related in all parts of the world. The talk concludes with a discussion of cultural modeling software built by our group capable of constructing useful cross-cultural simulations of these processes and a review of practical applications of our model, which includes its ability to help date heavily stratified traditions, most dramatically in respect to problematic early Chinese and Indian sources.