OPEN ACCESS

University of BRISTOL

Sandwell, I. (2019). Preaching and Christianisation: Communication, Cognition and Audience Reception. In W. Mayer, & C. De Wet (Eds.), *(Re)Visioning John Chrysostom: New Theories and Approaches* (1 ed., pp. 137–174). Brill Academic Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004390041_005

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
10.1163/9789004390041_005

Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research
PDF-document

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research
General rights

Chapter 11

Preaching and Christianisation: Communication, Cognition and Audience Reception

Isabella Sandwell

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of interest in the preaching of John Chrysostom. Scholars have explored the relationship between the written sermons and the words Chrysostom might actually have spoken, the make-up of Chrysostom's audiences, the physical spaces and liturgical context in which Chrysostom's sermon s were delivered, the rhetorical skill of the preacher and the way he sought to persuade his audiences.[1] What is less often recognised is that these issues are important because they help us understand the role that late-antique preaching had in facilitating the transition from a Graeco-Roman to a Christian society by disseminating the Christian message to ordinary populations of the towns and cities of the Roman World. At the same time, the whole field of the study of John Chrysostom's preaching has been under-theorised. Scholars have focused on placing Chrysostom's words in the context of the ancient rhetorical and exegetical theory that he himself would have used without realising that this can only tell us how far Chrysostom meets the criteria for successful communication laid out by ancient thinkers. There is no external criterion of judgement, no recognition that assessing Chrysostom by the very terms he has set will always be circular, and thus that such approaches have little real explanatory power. In this chapter I want to suggest that relating Chrysostom's preaching to modern communication theory and to recent developments in cognitive science, which explore very pertinent questions of how people comprehend verbal discourse and how knowledge is transmitted among human populations, can help us out of this circular loop and provide a new way to assess how successful Chrysostom's preaching was, and why.[2] I will set out the basic principles of these approaches, use them to critique previous scholarship on Chrysostom, and, finally, suggest some ways forward.

1   What Counts as Good Communication? Dialogue Versus Mass Communication

One of the main problems with existing scholarship on Chrysostom is that it misunderstands what counts as good communication and assumes that dialogic modes of communication, often influenced by Plato, are the ideal to which Chrysostom's preaching should be compared. Modern communication theory does not always share

---

[1] Jaclyn L. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and his Congregation in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 65–87; Wendy Mayer, "Who Came to Hear John Chrysostom Preach? Recovering a Late Fourth-Century Preacher's Audience," *Ephemerides Theologicae* 76 (2000): 73–87; *ead., The Homilies of St John Chrysostom—Provenance, Reshaping the Foundations,* OCA 273 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2005); *ead.,* "John Chrysostom: Extraordinary Preacher, Ordinary Audience," in *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletic*, eds. Mary B. Cunningham and Pauline Allen (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 103–37; *ead.,* "The Dynamics of Liturgical Space: Aspects of Interaction between St John Chrysostom and his Audiences," *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 111 (1997): 108.

[2] Doron Mendels, *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity: An Essay on Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999) has used modern communication theory, particularly modern media performance theory, to understand Eusebius of Caesarea's historical writing, but my goals in using communication theory are rather different. For me, such theories offer a way to critique the assumptions people have made about preaching as a mode of communication.

this overly positive view of dialogue. In particular, John Peters in his *Speaking into Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* challenges the way that dialogue has been idealised from the time of Plato to the present day due to its associations with democracy and reciprocal exchange.[3] For Peters, Plato's Socratic dialogues are a prime example of this mistaken ideal of communication.[4] He argues that Plato's *Phaedrus* presents dialogue as a kind of erotic relationship "that links lover and beloved in a reciprocal flow."[5] In this model, communication is "one-on-one, interactive, live and unique, non-reproducable" and also "sender orientated."[6] Despite the seeming reciprocity of dialogue, the real aim is to make the interlocutor think like the main speaker. As Peters puts it "the question for him [Plato] is the care of the seeds [words] not what the recipient might add to the process."[7] The main speaker in the dialogue can control how the other parties receive what he or she says precisely because they share culture and education and are bound closely to one another. There is to be no room for misunderstanding or divergent interpretations; rather, the goal is the recreation of one person's thoughts "faithfully in the mind of another," to make others think like you do, to elide the differences between self and other and to allow for a "sharing of minds."[8] Peters also argues that Plato's critique of writing can be seen as a critique of mass communication because for him the latter amounts to an "indiscriminate scatter" of words "on those who will not know what to do with them."[9] Thus, Peters argues that for Plato any form of mass communication that does take place should mimic as far as possible the conditions of dialogue with the speaker, carefully adjusting what he or she says to the listener to allow as little as possible room for misunderstanding.[10] As Peters puts it:

> Indiscriminate dissemination is bad; intimate dialogue or prudent rhetoric that matches message and receiver is good. Speeches not appropriate to their audience can bring dangerous harvest… Socrates thus conceives of mass communication as a kind of dialogue writ large. No stray messages, furtive listeners or unintended effects are allowed.[11]

Peters' view is that this model of dialogic communication is both flawed and doomed to failure. It is flawed because it is authoritarian in its desire to erase the other and recreate them and their thoughts in the image of the speaker. It is doomed to failure

---

[3] John Durham Peters, *Speaking into Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), chapter 1, esp. 33.

[4] For accounts of Platonic dialogue that, as Simon Goldhill (ed., *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 3,) puts it, recognise "the tensions in Platonic writing between the drive towards ideal, normative, authoritative knowledge and the slipperiness and playfulness of dialogue as a means of expression," see, for example, Alex Long, "Plato's Dialogues and A Common Rationale for Dialogue Form," in *ibid.*, 29–44 (with further bibliography).

[5] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 35.

[6] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 35; also 48. Peters bases his argument here on Jacques Derrida's analysis of the *Phaedrus* in his *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 149.

[7] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 35.

[8] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 20–21, 29 and 31.

[9] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 46, referring to *Phaedrus,* 276a.

[10] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 37–8.

[11] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 46, referring to *Phaedrus,* 276a.

because the nature of language and human minds means we can never make people think like we do.[12]

Instead, Peters proposes that we undertake a re-evaluation of mass-communication that recognises that it represents a more realistic and more democratic model for how communication works than dialogue, precisely because it is a "receiver oriented model in which the sender has no control over the harvest."[13] He presents Jesus' preaching, as represented in the parable of the sower, as an example of the ideal of mass communication because Jesus does not try to adjust his message to suit the listeners, but lets them interpret what he says in their own varied and idiosyncratic ways.[14] For Peters, this is a "parable about the diversity of audience interpretations in settings that lack direct interaction" and "when sender and receiver, sower and eventual harvest, are loosely coupled."[15] Jesus' exoteric, "asymetrical and public" mode of communication can thus be contrasted to Plato's/Socrates' esoteric, "reciprocal and hermetic" mode.[16] According to this alternate model, communication is characterised precisely by imperfect transmission from one mind to the next. As Peters says, "the gap between encoding and decoding," which allows audiences "to find meanings wildly divergent from those intended by the speaker,...may well be the mark of all communication."[17] These characteristics of communication, however, do not mean giving up on it altogether, or seeing it as pointless. Rather, as Peters puts it, we need to accept that true communication "erases neither the curious fact of otherness at its core *nor* the possibility of doing things through words" (my emphasis).[18]

Peters' work can provide us with a way to critique previous approaches to Chrysostom's homilies that uphold dialogue as the ideal model of communication and assess Chrysostom's preaching according to this ideal, either shoehorning it into the model of dialogue, or seeing it as a form of mass-communication to which Chrysostom and other late-antique preachers only resorted because the necessary conditions for true dialogue no longer existed. Perhaps surprisingly, the former view has been the more dominant in Chrysostom scholarship. The clearest statement of this view can be found in a short chapter on scriptural preaching by Carol Harrison.[19] In her exploration of how Christian preachers "imprinted" Scripture on the "hearts of the congregation" in order "to form, conform and reform the minds and hearts of their listeners to the word of God," she argues that late-antique preachers like Chrysostom were only able to have

---

[12] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 21–22, 29, 31 and 52.

[13] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 35. Peter's work is part of a larger re-evaluation of mass communication after it was abandoned by cultural studies departments in the 1990s because of its associations with totalitarianism and propaganda and because of the development of new media such as the internet. See Peter Simonson, *Refiguring Mass Communication: A History* (Urbana–Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010). Simonson's positive re-evaluation of mass communication takes a different stance from Peters' but he also critiques some of the negative associations of mass communications (Simonson, *Refiguring*, 19–20). For the different ways mass communication can be defined, see Simonson, *Refiguring*, 6 and 20–23). For a history of the terms "mass communication," see Simonson, *Refiguring*, chapter one.

[14] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 35 and 51–61. See also Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–1979,* ed. Stuart Hall *et al*. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 129.

[15] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 51.

[16] Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 53–54.

[17] Peters, *Speaking into Air,* 52 and 29. See also 59, 61, 66 and 22.

[18] Peters, *Speaking into Air,* 21.

[19] Carol Harrison, "The Typology of Listening: The Transformation of Scripture in Early Christian Preaching," in *Delivering the Word: Preaching and Exegesis in the Western Christian Tradition*, ed. William John Lyons and Isabella Sandwell (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

an impact on their audiences because they already shared Christian values, teachings and knowledge with them.[20] As she says,

> both preacher and congregation brought to their conversation minds which were already, to a large extent, shaped and moulded by their faith, their Christian lives, and their previous exposure to Christian teaching and catechesis on the basis of scripture (as well as to secular, pagan culture). They hopefully inhabited a shared thought world of presuppositions and expectations—of all the tacit markers of Christian faith and culture—which enabled what was said to be understood, assimilated, and to take effect in confirming—or if need be—reforming, the image of God which they already carried in their souls.[21]

For Harrison, sermons are one side of a conversation in which much could be left unsaid because the audience shared with their preacher a "complicit understanding, common memory, or 'symbol-system.'"[22] As she says,

> the preacher knows his congregation, cares for them as a parent does their child, loves them as a lover loves their beloved… This close relationship between speaker and hearer means that the speaker's admonitions, threats, criticisms, exhortations and attempts to shame or humble are the more effective. He knows his hearers; he knows precisely what will move and persuade them to a particular course of actions; he knows what is needed to instil a particular lesson or to communicate a particular idea.[23]

In this way, Scripture "was given a voice in the spoken words of the preacher, which meant that it could enter into a dialogue with the hearer, be applied to their individual circumstances, and effectively impressed upon their mind."[24] In presenting Chrysostom's preaching and his relationship with his audience in this way she casts them as a kind of Platonic/Sympotic dialogue: Chrysostom and his audience are in a loving relationship and share a thought world and it is these characteristics that enabled Chrysostom to communicate his message successfully to them. At the same time, as in Plato's ideal for mass communication outlined by Peters, Chrysostom was able to adapt what he said to the listeners so that he could control the conversation.[25]

This dialogic model for how Chrysostom's preaching works as successful communication is stated most clearly in Harrison, but also underlies a number of other works. Margaret Mitchell, in her *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation*, momentarily seems to recognise that Chrysostom's preaching might constitute a form of mass communication different from anything seen before in the ancient world when she writes of it as "live radio," but throughout the rest of her work she seems to favour a more dialogic model of communication for Chrysostom.[26] Thus she describes Chrysostom's homilies on Paul as "compositions which are at once

---

[20] Harrison, "Typology of Listening," 62.
[21] Harrison, "Typology of Listening," 65.
[22] Harrison, "Typology of Listening," 66.
[23] Harrison, "Typology of Listening," 67.
[24] Harrison, "Typology of Listening," 68. See also, 72.
[25] Harrison, "Typology of Listening," 67.
[26] Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville–London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 196.

exegetical, liturgical and rhetorical, participating in recognized sets of expectations and functions which bound together orator and audience in the act of sermonic biblical interpretation."[27] The influence of the dialogic model can also be seen when Mitchell writes of the way Chrysostom tried to create the sense of a face-to-face dialogue and loving relationship between Paul and his audience via his verbal portraits of Paul.[28] Mitchell argues that the "love hermeneutics" that Chrysostom used in his interpretation of Paul was "a hermeneutic of conformity" because the "conversation" between Paul and the audience that Chrysostom sought to stimulate created an unbreakable "spiritual and intellectual" bond between them.[29] There was thus no room for distance between what Paul meant by his words and how the audience understood them. Similarly, Francis Young's analysis of late-antique preaching talks of the way it taught ideals already shared by the Christian community as the factor that "ensured they were consistently heard in a meaningful way."[30] As a result, Young ultimately still sees the preacher as completely in charge of the message he preached and of the responses his audience had to it, and describes late-antique preaching as an example of Averil Cameron's notion of the "totalizing discourse'"created by Christianity in late antiquity.[31] Young thus recognises the undemocratic nature of dialogic communication, but still sees it as the only way that communication can really take place.[32]

Even scholars who do allow for a greater distance between Chrysostom and his audience end up falling back on some of the assumptions outlined above. Rylaarsdam's chapter "Chrysostom's Homiletical Method" in his recent book *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy* accepts the "weaknesses" of Chrysostom's audiences and that Chrysostom needed to adapt his message to their level, just as God adapted his message to humans.[33] Rylaarsdam describes various ways in which Chrysostom adapted what he said in order to bring the audience around to Christian ways of thinking and move them away from alternate images with which they were being bombarded in city life. While this does allow for some difference between Chrysostom and his audience and does provide some insightful analysis of what Chrysostom thought he was doing, the model of divine condescension on which it is based can be aligned with Peters' understanding of Plato's ideals for mass communication in which the speaker adapts what he says to the audience to prevent any unintended messages or misinterpretations, and so allows the speaker to continue to control the message. At the same time, Rylaarsdam still writes in a way that assumes Chrysostom's eventual success at bringing around his audiences to his way of thinking and still works with a model of preaching as totalitarian and as creating a single unified Christian discourse. As he puts it, "Chrysostom creates a universe of symbols in listeners' minds, so that people

---

[27] Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet*, 21–2.
[28] Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet*, 408. Mitchell uses Plato's image of the chain of inspiration from *Ion* 533D to explain Chrysostom's "love hermeneutics."
[29] Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet*, 39–40.
[30] Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 28.
[31] Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 257.
[32] See also Hagit Amirav, *Rhetoric and Tradition: John Chrysostom on Noah and the Flood*, TEG (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 20, 29–30, 33–4, 89 and 221, which relies on similar kinds of assumptions; and also the work of Raymond Laird, which does reference the work of cognitive science on metaphors, but which still focuses on Chrysostom's intentions and his successful use of rhetoric to achieve his goals with his audiences (*Mindset, Moral Choice and Sin in the Anthropology of John Chrysostom* [Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's Publications, 2012], 12–15 and 260).
[33] David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 6, esp. 228.

reconceive reality through the lens of Scripture and are persuaded towards a wise way of life."[34] For Rylaarsdam this means that Chrysostom's homilies are a prime example of Averil Cameron's "totalizing Christian discourse."[35]

Maxwell, in her work *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity*, in contrast, sees the dialogic nature of Chrysostom's preaching as a sign of its democratic nature. Like Rylaarsdam she argues that Chrysostom adapted his methods of pedagogy and communication to suit the range of educational levels in his audience.[36] She also explores the ways in which the views of Chrysostom's audiences of what it meant to be a Christian diverged from their preacher's, and argues that Chrysostom's homilies can be seen as dialogues with his audience over what constituted orthodox behaviour.[37] In her view, this dialogic nature of his preaching allowed for Chrysostom to have influence over his laity, but not to control them completely, so that ordinary Christians could have an "impact on the development of their religion."[38] This seems to get close to Peters' call for a model of communication in which we respect the difference of others while still allowing for words to have some of their desired effect and Maxwell herself describes it as being characteristic of a "democratization of theology" that some of have attributed to late antiquity.[39] The problem is that in the end Maxwell only allows for the conversation between preacher and audience and for this more democratic vision of preaching to happen "once a cultural chasm between the preachers and their audiences is no longer presupposed" and we accept that "the good or average Christians probably outweighed the bad ones."[40] For her this initial common ground provided the only basis on which Chrysostom and his audience could communicate. This means that even here there seems to be the need to disallow the free dissemination of Chrysostom's speech to whoever came and to limit the possibility of communication between those who held different views. Maxwell thus still conforms to the dialogic model of communication.

A rather different approach to these kinds of questions can be found in Simon Goldhill's important edited volume, *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*. Goldhill, like Peters, seeks to explore the privileging of dialogue in modern discourse, but focuses in particular on the question of whether Christians in late antiquity put an end to dialogue because there was something inherent in Christianity that made it tend towards more hierarchical and authoritarian modes of expression.[41] Lim and Clark are two of the contributors to Goldhill's volume who respond to this challenge by focusing on late-antique preaching. They argue that Christian leaders did reject the dialogue form, but not because there was anything inherently antithetical to dialogue about Christianity. Rather, it was because dialogue's elitist nature, and the way it presumed a certain shared level of education among participants, was not suited to the task that faced late-antique preachers when they sought to teach the Christian message to large, mixed

---

[34] Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 229–30.

[35] Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 229, quoting Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Early Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 21. See also Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 242 and 248.

[36] Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication*, chapter 4.

[37] Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication*, chapters 5–6, esp. 143.

[38] Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication*, 169 and 170.

[39] Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication*, 171, referring to J-M, Carrié, "Antiquité tardive et 'démocratisation de la culture': un paradigm à géométrie variable," *Antiquité Tardive* 9 (2001): 46.

[40] Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication*, 172, for the first quote; 110, for the second quote.

[41] Simon Goldhill, "Introduction: Why Don't Christians Do Dialogue," in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)*,* 1, 4–5, 7 and 8.

urban audiences.[42] In such contexts of mass communication, Lim and Clark suggest, preachers were very aware of the misunderstandings that could arise in audiences who did not share their levels of education and Christianisation.[43] They could not risk the give and take of the dialogic form, which they thought left too much room for misunderstanding and instead had to adopt a more authoritarian mode of communication.[44] Thus while sermons might adopt a conversational style, in fact "they offered a single voice" and various forms of "talking to, or talking at, or replying to questions, not talking with."[45] Lim and Clark thus allow for some critique of the dialogue form, with its exclusivity and its associations with elite culture and no longer try to shoehorn preaching into the model dialogue, but they leave intact stereotypes about mass communication as being more authoritative and less democratic than dialogue.[46]

This analysis shows that in previous scholarship on late-antique preaching, and in Chrysostom's preaching in particular, there has been a lot of confusion over how far dialogue and mass communication can be judged to be democratic or totalitarian modes of communication and a misunderstanding of what counts as good communication, with most scholars assuming that it means Chrysostom's speech having the impact he intended and constituting dialogue between people who basically already agree with one another. Peters' approach provides some clarity in respect to these issues because it argues convincingly that mass communication is more democratic and a more accurate model of how communication works precisely because it acted as a form of free dissemination that allowed people to make their own interpretation of its messages.

What Peter's approach cannot do, however, is provide us with any more details about the way the processes of decoding by the audience happened and how they understood, and made their own interpretations of, what the preacher said. The answer of scholars such as Harrison and Mitchell to this problem is to follow ancient models of mind and ancient theories of cognition. They thus adopt a blank slate model of the mind and see the minds of those in the audiences of preaching as being like wax tablets on which the words of the speaker were indented, and which can easily be wiped clean before correct teachings are imposed on it.[47] They are thus susceptible to the accusation that cognitive scientists often make against those working in the arts and social sciences of taking a "mind-blind" approach to cultural transmission, in which the mind is seen as a "blank slate" or "cultural sponge" that "learns what to think from culture."[48] Having a theoretical approach that helps us with this problem is particularly important in the case of late-antique preaching because we have so little evidence for the audience point of view. Cognitive science, which takes as its starting point that pre-existing structures

---

[42] Gillian Clark, "Can We Talk? Augustine and the Possibility of Dialogue," in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 118 (and also 123, 128 and 132–4); and Richard Lim, "Christians, Dialogues, and Patterns of Sociability in Late Antiquity," in *ibid.*, 151, 154, 166–8, and 171.

[43] Clark, "Can we Talk," 132–4.

[44] Clarke, "Can we Talk," 132–4; and Lim, "Christians, Dialogues," 161.

[45] Clarke, "Can we Talk," 118 and 127, for the two quotes. See also Lim, "Christians, Dialogues," 167–8.

[46] Clarke, "Can we Talk," 124–5; and Lim, "Christians, Dialogues," 154, 166 and 171.

[47] Jocelyn Penny Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1997) and Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet,* 55–64. The explicit influence of Small's model of the mind can be seen in Harrison, "Typology of Listening," 64. Wendy Mayer, "Preaching Hatred. John Chrysostom, Neuroscience and the Jews," Chapter 10 in this volume, also challenges the "mind–blind" approaches to the study of Chrysostom's preaching.

[48] D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004), 121–2.

and content in the human mind are crucial to models of communication and knowledge transmission, can, I argue, help us here because it outlines principles that are applicable to all "cognitively modern" human minds and so can tell us something at least about the minds of ancient people even if only in general terms. [49] I will first use the cognitive science of how people comprehend verbal discourse to reinforce Peters' argument about the gap between decoding and encoding in all communication and to provide a way to understand some of the parameters that limit the ability of the speaker to control the reception of what they say.[50] I will then turn to the cognitive science of religion (CSR) to add further nuance to our understanding of these parameters and to show that the types of religious ideas people developed when listening to preaching matter because, according to CSR, some ideas spread more easily than others among human populations.[51] This in turn will help us suggest some possible answers to our larger question of why Christianity was ultimately successful and the role that late-antique preaching, including that of Chrysostom, had in this success.

2 Cognitive Science, The Comprehension of Verbal Discourse, and The Transmission of Religious Knowledge

Cognition can be defined as "the set of processes by which we come to know the world," and cognitive science is thus "the set of disciplines which investigate these processes and propose explanatory theories about them."[52] It is the exploration of the mental processes involved when we gain knowledge about any aspect of the world around us. This includes how humans comprehend verbal discourse of any kind, from the briefest of conversations to the most highly developed works of literature. The question is that of what happens in the minds of listeners and readers when they first read or hear verbal discourse such as preaching. The answer provided by cognitive scientists is, to

---

[49] Peters himself dismisses cognitive science as having the answers to the problem of communication because of what he calls its emphasis on "information exchange." Instead, he prefers to think in terms of the pragmatic results of communication—what it can get done despite the tendency towards misinterpretation and misunderstanding (Peters, *Speaking into Air*, 24). For a classic example of how cognitive scientists interpret data normally taken to be culturally specific in terms of universally human mental processes, see Mark Turner's analysis of Clifford Geertz's account of the Balinese cock fight in Mark Turner, *Cognitive Dimensions of Social Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[50] Because of my interest in how Chrysostom's audiences understood his preaching, I focus on the sub-branch of cognitive science that deals with the way human minds process verbal discourse. In addition, in order to provide a simple way into the field for non-experts, I rely here mostly on works that have summarised these findings for application to the study of literature and other types of verbal discourse discussed by the humanities.

[51] A number of scholars have begun to apply the findings of CSR to early and late-antique Christianity. See, for example, István Czachesz, "The Gospels and Cognitive Science," in *Learned Antiquity: Scholarship and Society in the Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and the Early Medieval West*, ed. A.A. MacDonald, M.W. Twomey, and G.J. Reinink (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 25–36; *The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012); "The Transmission of Early Christian Thought: Towards a Cognitive Psychological Model," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 36.1 (2007): 65–83; and Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen and Risto Uro, eds, *Explaining Christian Origins: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Sciences* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) and all the contributions therein.

[52] E. Thomas Lawson, "Cognition," in *The Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon (New York: Cassell, 2000), 75. For an alternative but complementary summary of cognitive science, in particular cognitive poetics and Text World Theory, see Jan R. Stenger, "Text Worlds and Imagination in Chrysostom's Pedagogy," Chapter 13 in this volume.

put it simply, that they assimilate it to their existing knowledge.[53] This is the defining feature of the approach of cognitive science to knowledge acquisition and to human modes of communication by which this is achieved. As Gavins puts it,

> communication is both the means by which knowledge is transferred between human beings and the process by which those human beings interconnect the new knowledge structures they encounter through communication with existing beliefs, intermediate perceptions and previous experiences. [...] We do not simply gather knowledge through communication, we actively construct it. Through the process of inferencing, we make use of existing knowledge structures—linguistic, experiential, perceptual and cultural—in order to make sense of new sensory and linguistic input.[54]

Without this process of relating what one hears to existing knowledge, understanding cannot be said to have taken place. This emphasis on the existing knowledge of participants in processes of communication means that the speaker or writer can never control completely how people receive his or her words because so much of the process of comprehension takes place in the mind of the person receiving that discourse.[55] All the author, or the words she or he produces, can do is provide "linguistic and inferential information that narrows the search down to one or a very few specific domains of knowledge."[56] The rest of the process takes place in the mind of the receiver who firstly decides the direction in which to take the interpretation on the basis of contextual factors, such as their recent experiences, the immediate context in which the act of communication takes place and their own goals, and then secondly relates what they hear to their existing cultural and personal knowledge.[57] Assigning meaning to a text, making a mental representation of it, can thus be described as an inferential process in which the reader or listener fills in gaps in the discourse with their own existing knowledge.[58] This means that individual readers or listeners can assign meanings to the same piece of verbal discourse that are different not only from those intended by the speaker, but also from each other.[59] It also means that understanding something does not result in people having what they know completely transformed by what they hear and does not involve replication of the thoughts of the speaker in the minds of the receivers.

In fact, the emphasis on assimilating new knowledge to existing knowledge means that it can be hard to change how people think. As Schank and Abelson put it, "[u]nderstanding is knowledge-based... New information is understood in terms of old

[53] On the central role of the existing knowledge in the minds of readers/listeners, see also Stenger, "Text Worlds and Imagination."

[54] Joanna Gavins, *Text World Theory: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 24 and 18–20.

[55] Gavins, *Text World*, 59–60; and Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London–New York: Routledge, 2002), 91.

[56] Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 122. See also, Gavins, *Text World*, 29.

[57] On existing knowledge, Gavins, *Text World*, 6. See also Stockwell *Cognitive Poetics*, 7–8, 75; Turner, *Cognitive Dimensions*, 12. On the importance of other contextual factors, Robert P. Shank and Roger C. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977), 9; Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 31 and 33; Gavins, *Text World*, 6.

[58] Gavins, *Text World*, 24 and 38. See also Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (New York–London: Routledge), 160.

[59] Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, 123 and also 8.

information. Man is a processor that only understands what has previously been understood."[60] The problem with this view is that it can make it hard to see how people could ever learn anything new, and it is now a little out-dated. More recently, attempts have been made to explain how human minds can combine what is heard in verbal discourse with existing knowledge and so learn new things.[61] The emphasis on the role of the creation of new meaning in the understanding process is particularly prominent in the work of Mark Turner on conceptual blending.[62] For Turner conceptual blending is "the central engine of human meaning," the way in which humans create new meaning out of existing meanings, by combining information in new ways.[63] The resulting meaning is, as Turner put it, "not identical to either of its influences…not merely a correspondence between them, and not even an additive combination of some of their features," but rather a new "child" meaning.[64] When we apply this to how listeners process verbal discourse, we can see verbal discourse as contributing to one of the input spaces and the existing knowledge of the audiences as contributing to the other. The mental representation those listening make of the verbal discourse is thus a blend of information provided by the discourse and information in the mind of the listener. As such it is something that can neither be found in the text, nor something that already exists in the mind of the listener, but instead is something new.

However, even with this recognition of how new knowledge can be created in human minds, there is still a very strong sense of the power of existing knowledge and of the tendency to assimilate what we hear to it, unless there is a very strong impetus not to. As Turner argues of conceptual blending, there is still a tendency for us to "recruit selectively from our most favoured patterns of knowing and thinking. Consequently, blending is very powerful, but also heavily subject to bias."[65] Gavins refers to this as "the principle of minimum departure;" people will assume that they can fill out the gaps left in the texts with familiar information from their minds "until they are presented with information to the contrary."[66] One of the few pieces of work applying cognitive theory to the reception of religious teachings, such as those normally

---

[60] Schank and Abelson, 67. See also the work of Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social-Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); and J.W. Alba and L. Hasher, "Is Memory Schematic?," *Psychology Bulletin* 93 (1983): 203–31.

[61] Some of the earliest work in this direction was carried out in the 1970s: David E. Rumelhart and Donald A. Norman, "Accretion, Tuning, and Restructuring: Three Modes of Learning," in *Semantic Factors in Cognition,* ed. J.W. Cotton and R.A. Klatzky (Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978), 37–53, and "Analogical Processes in Learning," in *Cognitive Skills and their Transmission,* ed. J.R. Anderson (Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981), 335–59. However, Mark Turner (*Cognitive Dimensions*, 144) has argued that these works don't go far enough in understanding how new meaning is produced. Mayer, "Preaching Hatred," in this volume discusses work from the related field of neuroscience, which has recently revealed the capacity the human brain has to learn new concepts.

[62] Turner, *Cognitive Dimensions,* 138–9. For Mark Turner this interest in the creation of new meaning, rather than in simply describing existing knowledge, is what distinguishes cognitive science from the social sciences—and, we could argue, the humanities. Turner, *Cognitive Dimensions*, 11. For a critique of Mark Turner's work, see Vladimir Glebkin, "Is Conceptual Blending the Key to the Mystery of Human Evolution and Cognition?," *Cognitive Linguistics* 26.1 (2015): 95–111.

[63] Turner, *Cognitive Dimensions*, 21 and 15 and 54 (universally human) and 44 and 21, 17 and 139 (on engine of meaning). A full account of conceptual blending can be found at Turner, *Cognitive Dimension* (see especially 17–19) and in Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12–25 and 57–84.

[64] Turner, *Cognitive Dimension*, 17.

[65] Turner, *Cognitive Dimensions*, 75.

[66] Gavins, *Text World*, 12.

found in preaching, supports this view.[67] K.I. Pargament and D.V. DeRosa found that their experiments on how people recalled short passages of religious teaching offered "modest support for the notion that people tend to remember more accurately religious messages that are consistent with their [existing] religious beliefs" and that "people distort the content of the message to fit more closely with their [existing] religious beliefs."[68]

The existing cultural and personal knowledge of the audience, their normal and habitual ways of thinking, thus provide one kind of "cognitive constraint" on the ability of verbal discourse to change how people think, or for the author of that discourse to impose their thoughts on the audience. Turning to the cognitive science of religion (CSR) can help us to understand that when it comes to verbal discourse on religious matters there are also other very particular cognitive constraints that we need to take into account. The cognitive science of religion seeks to explore why some religious concepts spread more successfully than others and are more widespread in human populations. CSR scholars focus on the nature of the human minds transmitting religious concepts and ask whether some types of concepts have content that makes them fit particularly well with these human minds—what they call "content biases." They eschew the memes model of cultural and religious transmission in which religious ideas self-replicate as exact copies in the minds with which they come into contact.[69] They also oppose "mind-blind" approaches to learning and the transmission of culture, which tend to assume that people simply absorb the culture around them and so all end up thinking the same way.[70] Instead they argue that people "have active minds that are continuously engaged in the construction of novel thoughts and in the transformation of culturally transmitted ideas."[71] As Slone puts it,

> The cultural model of religion, not to mention conventional wisdom, implies that religious people deduce their thoughts from the premises of given theological, cultural, or scientific premises, but in fact people spend most of their time thinking abductively and so use online cognitive strategies that employ tacit, noncultural knowledge about the world and its workings. Therefore, the key to understanding religion—especially 'lived' religion—is to identify the aspects of cognition that constrain religious behavior… .[72]

To understand these non-cultural, cognitive constraints we need to grasp the basic distinction CSR makes between religious ideas that are, on the one hand, natural, intuitive, unreflective and easy for human minds to remember, use and transmit to

---

[67] K.I. Pargament and D.V. DeRosa, "What Was That Sermon About? Predicting Memory for Religious Messages From Cognitive Psychology Theory," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 24.2 (1985): 119–236.

[68] Pargament and DeRosa, "What Was That Sermon About?," 190.

[69] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Vintage Books, 2002), 38–51.

[70] D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2004), 121–2.

[71] Slone, *Theological Incorrectness,* 121–2: Slone, following Sperber, pointed out that when ideas spread in a given human population, they are constantly undergoing transformation: "when people make their representations public, and then when recipients of the representation hear and process them." (Slone, *Theological Incorrectness,* 64–6). See also Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a Cognitive Science of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2003)*,* 11; Barrett, *Why Would Anyone*, 10–11; and Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 47–51.

[72] Slone, *Theological Incorrectness,* 121–2; see also Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works*, 11.

others and those, on the other hand, that are unnatural, highly counter-intuitive, reflective and hard for human minds to remember, use and transmit.[73] Intuitive, natural and unreflective concepts are either thought to fit in most ways with universal ontological categories thought to be shared human minds (such as inanimate object, person, animal), but to violate one of the characteristics of that category in a way that makes them much more memorable than entirely intuitive concepts because they stand out—Boyer's minimally counterintuitive (MCI) concepts[74]—*or* they are thought to be anthropomorphising in nature in that they assume that divine entities are intentional agents who act and think like humans.[75] Because they are based in our ordinary cognitive processes and categories, such ideas are thought to be very easy to process and make inferences from and thus for people to remember and pass on to others.[76] When using them, human minds can default to assuming that in most ways they act like any other member of that ontological category. However, such concepts are usually seen by cognitive scientists to be confined to popular religious concepts such as ghosts, which deviate from the category "person" because they do not have a solid body but in most other ways act and think like humans, and anthropomorphic divinities, who are in some sense meant to be all-seeing and all-powerful but otherwise act, think and even look like human beings.[77] The theological concepts of mainstream religions, such as Christian doctrinal formulations about the relationship between God, the Word, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and the understanding of God as a completely transcendent, nonmaterial, all-knowing, infinite and limitless being, are, in contrast, thought to be highly counter-intuitive and complex, and thus to be very hard for the human mind to memorise and transmit.[78] Such theological conceptions of divinity are, in the cognitive science of religion, seen to open up an ontological gap between God and humans that is hard to bridge; how can we understand such divinities if we have no way to relate them to ourselves and our own experience or to fit them into one of our existing ontological categories?[79]

Cognitive scientists thus argue that there are clear cognitive constraints that make it hard for human populations to grasp more complex theological ideas.

---

[73] Re more intuitive versus less intuitive, see Boyer *Religion Explained*; reflective versus unreflective, see Dan Sperber, "Intuitive and Reflective Beliefs," *Mind and Language* 12 (1997): 67–83; natural versus unnatural, see Robert N. McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[74] Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 58–105. On cognitively optimal religious concepts generally, see also Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004), 29–48.

[75] Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Justin L. Barrett and Frank C. Keil, "Conceptualizing a Non-natural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts," *Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1996): 219–47. For a slightly different approach to the issues, see Pascal Boyer "What Makes Anthropomorphism Natural: Intuitive Ontology and Cultural Representations," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2.1 (1996): 83–97.

[76] Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 5 and 47.

[77] On ghosts, see Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 84–86.

[78] Barret and Kiel, "Conceptualizing," 219–21; and Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works*, 11. On cognitively costly concepts generally, see Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*, 49–59. Some have begun to challenge the stark contrast between natural, more intuitive concepts of the divine and highly counterintuitive theological ones. See Helen de Cruz, "Cognitive Science of Religion and the Study of Theological Concepts," *Topoi* 23.2 (2014): 487–97; Helen de Cruz and Johan de Smedt, *A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2015); and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents: Why We Believe in Souls, Gods and Buddhas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95–136.

[79] Barrett and Kiel, "Conceptualizing," 220.

Whitehouse has suggested in his discussion of what he calls the doctrinal mode of religiosity that methods of cultural transmission can overcome this problem by supporting the memorisation and transmission of these kinds of ideas via explicit systems of education, preaching, constant repetition and rote learning.[80] The problem is that in Whitehouse's model constant exposure to explicit education systems that repeat the message is needed for such ideas to be transmitted faithfully.[81] More recent work suggests that even when people do come to learn highly complex theological ideas from such repeated theological teachings and are able to reproduce them in certain circumstances, they do not use them when engaged in "online reasoning" about the divine. Barrett and Kiel conducted experiments involving people who attributed to God "such nonhuman properties as being able to pay attention to multiple activities at the same time, not having a single location but being either everywhere or nowhere, not needing to hear or see to know about things, being able to read minds, and so forth."[82] Taking as their starting point the way that human minds fill out verbal discourse they encounter with their existing knowledge, they presented this group with an outline narrative that left a number of details unspecified and then asked them to recall it to see whether they used prescribed, complex, theological ideas to fill it out, or other ideas. They found that the test subjects "systematically misremembered God as having human properties in contradiction to these theological ones" including "being able to pay attention to only one thing at a time, moving from one location to another, having only one particular location in space and time, and needing to hear and see things to know about them."[83] It seems that this more intuitive way of thinking about God over-rode consciously held theologically correct knowledge in certain contexts. What Barrett and Kiel concluded, as summarised by Barrett, is that

> [p]eople seem to have difficulty maintaining the integrity of their reflective theological concepts in rapid, real-time problem-solving because of the processing demands. Theological properties, such as being able to be in multiple places at once, not needing to perceive, being able to attend to an infinite number of problems at once, and not being bound by time, importantly deviate from the non-reflective beliefs that mental tools freely generate… Thus, when presented with accounts of God…that must be rapidly comprehended and remembered, most of the features that do not enjoy the strong support of mental tools get replaced by simpler, non-reflective versions that can produce rapid inferences, predictions and explanations.[84]

---

[80] He opposes this doctrinal mode of religion to what he calls an imagistic mode in which people learn complex religious ideas by undergoing dramatic rituals that embed them in episodic memory. He sees the religious ideas transmitted by the doctrinal and the imagistic mode to be in opposition to the more natural and intuitive religious ideas discussed in Boyer's work (Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*).

[81] On the importance of rote learning in early medieval Christianity, see the second edition of Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xii–xiii and chapter 3, but she focuses on monastic culture and on those who devote their lives to Christianity rather than on lay Christians.

[82] Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Lanham, MD–Plymouth: Alta Mira Press, 2004), 10–11, summarising research published in Barrett and Kiel, "Conceptualizing."

[83] Barrett, *Why Would Anyone*, 10–11. See also, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, "Intuitive and Explicit in Religious Thought," *JCognCult* 4.1 (2004): 125.

[84] Barrett, *Why Would Anyone*, 11. For a critique of Barrett and Kiel's work, see James A. van Slyke, *The Cognitive Science of Religion* (Farnham–Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 61–90.

It seems that while individuals can repeat theologically correct ideas when asked about them directly, when using and transmitting them "in every day contexts," they tend to simplify them and to "'shut down' or 'bracket' the counterintuitive features of concepts so that inferences are made on the basis of intuitive aspects only."[85] This means that the theological ideas learnt "in one's culture…play only a partial role in what people think and do" and even when people know correct theological ideas, this does not control how they think and act.[86] As Pyysiäinen puts it,

> Written theologies are not exhaustive catalogues of the beliefs of a given population. They rather are artefacts that serve as cues directing peoples' inferences… The actually represented ideas do not mechanically follow from the perceived stimuli; they are brought about by an active inferential or associative process in the mind of the person in question (as argued in Sperber and Wilson 1986). There are no intrinsic meanings in written texts (or spoken words) that could be passively downloaded; we rather attribute meanings to texts (or to speech) in the light of what we already know and believe.[87]

In CSR, as compared to cognitive science more generally, the "what people already know and believe" is often confined to non-cultural, natural and intuitive religious concepts. The actual religious representations made in the minds of individuals are thus thought to differ from correct theological ideas in entirely predictable, narrowly confined ways.[88] As Slone seems to recognise, this can lead to the idea that individual human behaviour is "genetically predetermined."[89] To counter this reductionism, I argue that we need to allow for a broader range of influences on the way that individuals transform and simplify the theological ideas to which they are exposed.[90] We need to accept that representations of the divine that individuals make will be affected not just by the universal human tendency to favour anthropomorphic deities, but also by the full range of the existing knowledge in their minds including cultural and personal knowledge. This means that the anthropomorphising representations people make of God "may vary enormously in different cultures" and, I would argue, within cultures.[91] This provides us with a response to those who take a "mind-blind" approach.[92] It also helps us answer the objections of those who say we can know nothing about the responses of Chrysostom's audiences due to lack of evidence. Even if we cannot know much in exact detail about how people understood what Chrysostom said, the tendency to favour anthropomorphising conceptions and the way people assimilate what they hear to their existing knowledge at least provide controlling parameters that show the kinds of restrictions there might be on how at least some in his audiences received his words.

3   Cognitive Science and Chrysostom's Preaching as Mass Communication

---

[85] Pyysiäinen, "Intuitive and Explicit," 142.
[86] Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 4–5. See also 64–6.
[87] Pyysiäinen, "Intuitive and Explicit," 125, referring to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).
[88] Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 22 and Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*, 20.
[89] Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 122.
[90] For a much broader critique of the reductionism of the cognitive science of religion, see van Slyke, *Cognitive Science*.
[91] Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works*, 11.
[92] See n.47.

In the first section, we suggested that mass communication was a better model for the way communication works generally, and that it can be used to critique those who try to shoehorn Chrysostom's preaching into the dialogic model of communication due to the misguided assumption that this is the only way communication can really happen. We can now also argue that there is positive evidence for seeing Chrysostom's preaching as a form of mass communication, rather than as a form of dialogue. Recent work on Chrysostom's preaching has revealed the diverse nature of its audiences, both in terms of socio-cultural background, educational levels, gender and degrees of Christianisation. It follows that if his preaching can be deemed to have been successfully at all, it must have worked more like Peters' understanding of mass communication.[93] The relatively large size of the audiences, which could count in their hundreds, also suggests that Chrysostom's preaching be seen as a form of mass communication because, as Simonson points out, situations in which an individual addresses large-scale, live audiences can be seen as akin to radio or TV transmission.[94] This supports the idea that Mitchell suggests, but does not explore further, that Chrysostom's preaching can be seen as live radio.[95]

It might well have been Chrysostom's ideal that the communication he had with his audiences was a kind of dialogue with like-minded individuals with high levels of Christianisation who were well-prepared to receive his teachings. As he suggests in his second homily from his longer series on Genesis, Lenten fasting could put his audiences in a state of mind that would make them particularly receptive to his teachings,

> So now is the right time, if ever there was one, for teachings of the kind I have in mind, when the maid no longer resists her mistress, but is docile, responsive and obedient, restraining the impulses of nature and keeping within proper limits.[96]

He uses the metaphor of sowing in well-prepared soil to describe his preaching in such situations,

> So come now, let us imitate the farmers: when they see the land scarified and cleared of the obstruction of weeds, they sow the seed liberally. It should be the same with ourselves.[97]

---

[93] Re diversity of socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels of audience: Mayer, "Who Came to Hear"; and Frans van der Paverd, *St. John Chrysostom, the Homilies on the Statues*, OCA 239 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1991), 266–88; gender: Mayer, "Who Came to Hear"; lack of separate Christian educational system: E.G. Clark, "The Ant of God: Augustine, Scripture and the Curriculum," in *Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity,* ed. David Brakke, Deborah M. Deliyannis, and Edward Watts (Farnham–Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 151–63; different levels of Christianisation: Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
[94] Simonson, *Reconfiguring*, 23 (Simonson also suggests that "religious traditions" generally "house some of the oldest, deepest, and most significant ideas about and forms of mass communication" (*Reconfiguring*, 6). For the size of Chrysostom's audiences, see Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity AD 200–400* (Atlanta Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 12–14. Mayer, "Preaching Hatred" in this volume discusses the issue of the size of audiences in greater depth.
[95] Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet*, 196.
[96] *In Gen. hom.* 2.3 (PG 53.27.12–15). All translations of the homilies on Genesis, unless otherwise indicated, are those of Robert C. Hill (FC 74).
[97] *In Gen. hom.* 2.2 (PG 53.26.43–47).

However, Lent was an exceptional season when larger than normal numbers of people came to church and sought to display their Christianity, so we can imagine that it was a time when audiences were particularly diverse.[98] Chrysostom seems to recognise this at the start of Homily 6 on Genesis where he berates his audience just a short while later for having left behind their Lenten fasting and sobriety to attend the horse races. Despite the fact that he feels very strongly that the races will have put the audience in the wrong frame of mind to hear his words, he says he has a duty to preach to them anyway whatever the outcome: "whether you heed my words or reject them, the reward coming to me will be unimpaired."[99] He makes a similar point about Jesus' preaching in his interpretation of the parable of the sower in his homilies on Matthew.[100] It is clear that he understands that he is not always engaged in intimate dialogue with like-minded people who are ready to hear his words as he intends and that he cannot always know how his words will be received.

 Once we have accepted that preaching was a form of mass communication which involved free dissemination of teachings to those who heard them in different ways, we can move on to my second argument that, despite the lack of evidence, we can say something about the ways in which ancient audiences received what their preacher said by starting with Chrysostom's words and using what we have learnt from cognitive science to sketch out the parameters of audience responses.

 One of the problems late-antique preachers like Chrysostom faced was that of how to teach difficult theological concepts to ordinary Christians. It was a time of great doctrinal debates about the nature of God and Christ and how the two related to one another and preachers knew they had a challenge on their hands striking the right balance between making these ideas comprehensible and remaining doctrinally correct. Studying how preachers taught these ideas and how audiences might have received them can provide a useful case study for exploring the applicability of the theories of communication and cognition discussed in the previous sections.

 Chrysostom's first two homilies on Matthew contain an extended description of the heavenly city, which acts as an introduction to his preaching on the Gospel and to set the tone for that preaching. It is intended to tackle the problem that the Gospel of Matthew does not say as much as Chrysostom would like about Christ's divine nature, at least in comparison to the Gospel of John. It uses a description of the heavenly kingdom to emphasise that this kingdom is the true subject of the Gospel, to remind his audiences that Christ and God are one and the same, and to emphasise that Christ is God incarnate. The incarnation—and, one could argue, in particular the Nicene version of this to which Chrysostom more or less subscribed—is a classic example of a highly counter-intuitive concept that would be hard for human minds to comprehend, remember and transmit.[101] According to Whitehouse, such ideas can normally only be transmitted via rote learning of doctrinal formulations and "endless repetitions," as suggested by his doctrinal mode.[102] However, this is not the method that Chrysostom uses here where he

---

[98] Mayer, "Extraordinary Preacher," 131.

[99] *In Gen. hom.* 6.2 (PG 53.54.55–57).

[100] *In Matt. hom.* 44.4 (PG 57.467.52–55).

[101] For a detailed study of Chrysostom's understanding of the incarnation, see Melvin Edward Lawrenz, "The Christology of John Chrysostom" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1987), 132–203. For a more recent analysis of Chrysostom's christology, see Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy,* esp. 138.

[102] Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*, 5 (and see the whole of the introduction). In an article on Chrysostom's homilies on Genesis I have argued that Chrysostom did use a method that required his audiences to learn how to repeat the early lines of Genesis by rote without processing them further, and that in so doing he wanted to promote a sense of wonder at an incomprehensible God, who was able to

instead chooses a vivid, narrative depiction of Christ/God as king to explain the fact that the incarnate was simultaneously a transcendental divine being and fully human. Chrysostom starts by providing a detailed description of the heavenly kingdom and its King. He first uses this image of the king to capture the idea of God/Christ's divine nature, presenting him as living in a bejewelled palace in heaven surrounded by his heavenly courtiers. Chrysostom tells us that the heavenly Kingdom is made "of gold, and things more precious than any gold" with "gates consisting of sapphires and pearls."[103] He goes on to describe "where the King sits, and who of His host stand by Him; where are the angels, where the archangels...[a]nd how many are the orders of these tribes, how many those of the senate, how many the distinctions of dignity."[104] In the next homily these images are returned to and developed into a representation of God/Christ as a triumphant military commander who was victorious over the devil like a triumphant general.

> In this place stands the trophy of the cross, brilliant and conspicuous, the spoils of Christ, the first-fruits of our nature, the booty of our King. For we shall know all of these things clearly from the Gospel. If you follow in appropriate silence, we shall be able to lead you about everywhere, and to show from this battle where death has been laid low crucified, and where sin is hanged up, and where are the many and wondrous offerings from this war. You shall see both the tyrant bound here, and the multitude of the captives following, and the citadel from which that unholy demon overran all things in earlier times.[105]

The tyrant is, of course, the devil and the trophy of the cross refers to the role of Christ's death and resurrection in overcoming the power that the devil had had over humanity since the fall of Adam. This shift then allows him to take the next step in which the image of God/Christ as a King is used to capture the role of the incarnate Christ in going down to earth to bring about the salvation of mankind.

> For consider how great it is to hear how, on the one hand, God having arisen 'out of the royal thrones, leaped down' from heaven to earth, and to hell itself, and stood in the battle array; and how, on the other hand, the devil set himself in array against Him; or rather not against God unveiled, but God hidden in man's nature. And the marvel is that you will see death destroyed by death, and curse extinguished by curse, and through those things that made the devil powerful, through those will his tyranny be destroyed.[106]

act in ways impossible for human beings (Isabella Sandwell, "How to Teach Genesis 1.1–19: John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea on the Creation of the World," *JECS* 19.4 (2011): 539–64). I had not read Whitehouse at that point, but Chrysostom's approach in those homilies fits well with his "doctrinal mode" of religious transmission.

[103] *In Matt. hom.* 1.17 (PG 57.23.14–17).

[104] *In Matt. hom.* 1.17 (PG 57.24.6–10). See also, "you shall see...the King Himself sitting on the throne of that unspeakable glory, and angels, and archangels standing by Him, and the tribes of the saints, with those interminable myriads." *In Matt. hom.* 2.1 (PG 57.23.50–54).

[105] *In Matt. hom.* 2.1 (PG 57.24.34–47). For the Matthew homilies, I have based my translations on those found in NPNF 1, 10, but have made adjustments to these where I thought the style could be improved or the sense conveyed more accurately.

[106] *In Matt. hom.* 2.1 (PG 57.24.54–25.8), quoting Wisdom 18:15.

A little later, Chrysostom then goes on to illustrate the way God came down to earth by comparing it to the way a King, in particular a Roman emperor, would live as a soldier among his troops when going into battle.

> [See] how it has immediately shown you the King in your own form, as though in an army camp? For the king does not always appear bearing the dignity proper to him, but laying aside his purple robe and his diadem, he often takes on the appearance of a foot soldier.[107]

The image of God as a king can be found throughout the writings of the early fathers and onwards.[108] That God is a king with a Kingdom is also a familiar idea from biblical texts—references to the heavenly kingdom are found repeatedly in Matthew and images of the royal court, of God sitting on his throne, and of the heavenly city were found numerous times throughout the Old Testament, especially Isaiah, Ezekiel and Psalms, and in the book of Revelation.[109] Similarly, the image of Christ achieving a victory over the devil is also an entirely traditional and long accepted one in early Christianity as was first revealed by Gustaf Aulén, who sees it as playing a crucial role in the development of Nicene christology in opposition to Arianism and builds his "dramatic" model of atonement from it.[110]

However, in the passage from the Matthew homilies Chrysostom takes these conventional images and develops them in new ways. He dramatised the Christus Victor image to an extreme degree so that we now have God/Christ getting up from his throne and "leaping down to earth" (the verb used is *allomai*) to fight an actual battle against the devil. In this way, Chrysostom was deliberately drawing on knowledge members of his audience would have had of kings who were normally distant from their subjects, but who in certain circumstances could lower themselves to live among ordinary people, to inform their understanding of the incarnation. He also takes what was a traditional Christian and biblical image of God as a king and gives it a new, untraditional twist as he tries to make the difficult idea of the incarnation more familiar to his audiences. Just like an earthly king (specifically a Roman emperor), God/Christ when fighting the battle with the devil will lay aside his normal clothes and appear as an ordinary soldier and live in the army camp with his men.[111] By developing the metaphor of Christ the King who sits in a bejewelled palace in his heavenly kingdom so that it also included the way the king could dress like an ordinary soldier and live among the troops at times of battle Chrysostom was able to create one simple image that conveyed what was to go on to become orthodox christology: the image of the king stood for not only Christ's divine nature but also his human nature and the incarnation.

The trouble is that this image brings with it some potential dangers because the image of the divine that it presented, with Christ/God described as sitting on a throne and then leaping down from heaven to earth as if he had a body and legs, might be seen

---

[107] *In Matt. hom.* 2.3 (PG 57.26.28–33).

[108] The references are too many to mention, but the writings of Irenaeus provide a good starting point in the search for examples of the image. On the metaphor of the king to describe God, see Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

[109] On Matthew, see Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, 2–3, 69 and esp. 281. On other images of heaven, see Russell, *A History of Heaven*, 13–14.

[110] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement,* trans. A.G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1970), 22, 37, 53, 58–61 and 76.

[111] The metaphor of clothing is one that Chrysostom often used for the incarnation. See Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 137.

as more anthropomorphic than would normally have been acceptable. Similarly, the idea that the incarnate Christ was like a king living in a camp with his soldiers could have prompted the audience to elaborate on the normal metaphor of Christ/God as King and to imagine ways, other than that he is the ruler of heaven, in which he might be like an earthly king. On other occasions, Chrysostom warned his audiences against such anthropomorphising conceptions of God. Thus in the homilies on Genesis he tells them to take such anthropomorphic statements at the "level of expression" only. As he says,

> 'They heard the sound of the Lord God,' the text says, 'as he strolled in the garden in the evening...' What are you saying—God strolls? Are we assigning feet to him? Have we no exalted conception of Him? No, God doesn't stroll—perish the thought: how could he, present as he is everywhere and filling everything with his presence?[112]

In this passage Chrysostom reasserts an unnatural, highly counter-intuitive notion of God—omnipresent—in the face of possible misleading language in the Old Testament, which spoke of God moving in physical space and using limbs. What, then, is going on when Chrysostom himself uses such an anthropomorphising image of God in the Matthew homilies?

Scholars of Chrysostom and of late-antique Christianity generally have tended to see such images as part of a "material turn" in the fourth century in which the potential of "corporeal things" to signify religious truth was seen more positively than had been the case earlier.[113] These images could, it has been argued, now be used as vehicles of transcendence and a way to point to the spiritual realities not normally seen by the human eye.[114] As such, Rylaarsdam argues, they were for Chrysostom akin to "God's habit of appropriating human form" and of looking, speaking and acting "like a human in order to reveal sublime truths" to them and thus constitute an example of Chrysostom's "divine pedagogy," the way he adapts what he says to the level of his audience.[115] This is, of course, perfectly valid as an account of what Chrysostom was trying to do, of his explicit intentions. The problem comes when scholars move from this position to making assumptions about the success of such images when received by audience members. Rylaarsdam talks about Chrysostom using such images "to block and crowd" out those that enter their minds from civic life and to lead people away from "disproportionate attachment" to creatures and thus speaks of them as a "totalizing Christian discourse" that "created a universe for his listeners."[116] Thus although Rylaarsdam does recognise the presence of alternate images in the minds of Chrysostom's listeners, he sees these as easily swept away by the power of Chrysostom's rhetoric. To me this leap from Chrysostom's intentions to the impact and success he has with his audiences is problematic. It constitutes an example of the "mind-blindness" of those working from socio-cultural approaches, of the way they see the

---

[112] *In Gen. hom.* 17.3-4 (PG 53.135.15–20).

[113] Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 240 referring to the work of Patricia Cox Miller in her *Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Antique Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Press, 2009). For similar approaches to the use of vivid verbal images by late-antique Christian leaders, see also Liz James and Ruth Webb, "To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium," *Art History* 14 (1991): 1–14.

[114] Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 240 and 242.

[115] Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 248 and 240 and 243.

[116] Rylaarsdam, *Divine Pedagogy*, 239 and 242.

human mind as a blank slate just waiting to be filled by teachers and others who propagate cultural knowledge.[117]

Instead we need a more nuanced approach in which we recognise that only those who were very familiar with Chrysostom's preaching and with the more in-depth teaching of Christian concepts would have grasped Chrysostom's words as he intended and have understood that the very material image of God/Christ provided here was meant to reveal sublime truths about the transcendental God. For this group, their literal indoctrination would, on the one hand, make it easier for them to override the cognitive predisposition to favouring more intuitive and anthropomorphic conceptions of God and, on the other hand, mean that their existing cultural knowledge would support rather than contradict what Chrysostom was trying to say. For others, however, who attended Chrysostom's preaching less regularly, who had not been catechised and who generally had far less knowledge of formal Christian teachings, the active role of the receiving minds, the tenacity of existing knowledge and the tendency to fall back on intuitive, theologically incorrect conceptions of divinity that we heard about in the previous section would have had an impact on their understanding. Chrysostom's anthropomorphising image of Christ/God the King who moved through space from one location to another would fit well with the kind of simplified images that many audience members would have themselves made and used in online reasoning and that they would have found easier to comprehend, memorise and transmit. The difficulty human minds have in grasping highly counterintuitive concepts of the divine would in turn act as a cognitive constraint that prevented them from using this image as a bridge to a more transcendental conception of God that Chrysostom was trying to get across as part of his teaching on the incarnation.[118] We could thus argue, that it is likely that after hearing this passage some at least in Chrysostom's audiences would have had their intuitive, unreflective, less theologically correct conception of God reinforced rather than challenged.

However, as we saw at the end of the previous section, it is not enough to focus only on universal, human tendencies and constraints; we also need to take account of the full range of knowledge a human being might hold in their head when they listen to verbal discourse.[119] Thus the fact that Chrysostom's audiences would have blended, in Mark Turner's sense, the image he created of God/Christ as king with their existing knowledge suggests a further way in which their understanding of the incarnation and of God would have diverged from what Chrysostom intended. We cannot know anything about the personal knowledge on which members of Chrysostom's audiences might have drawn, or even how groups based on class and gender might have responded

---

[117] On the importance of the minds and mental processes of the members of Chrysostom's audiences, see also Stenger, "Text Worlds and Imagination": "The preaching situation was more than a social interaction… [T]he synaxis was a mental construct that was produced through textual strategies… ."

[118] As Gervais *et al.* put it, summarising the work of Barrett and Nyhof, "the presence of mildly counter-intuitive content in concepts or narratives can bias memory in a manner that would favour such concepts or narratives in cultural evolution." Will M. Gervais *et al.*, "The Cultural Transmission of Faith: Why Innate Intuitions are Necessary, But Insufficient, to Explain Religious Belief," *Religion* 41.3 (2011): 394, on Justin L. Barrett and Melanie A. Nyhof, "Spreading Nonnatural Concepts: The Role of Intuitive Conceptual Structures in Memory and Transmission of Cultural Materials," *JCognCult* 1 (2001): 69–100.

[119] On the importance of the existing knowledge of the members of Chrysostom's audiences, see also Stenger, "Text World and Imagination." On the question of the extent to which the impact of Chrysostom's homilies on his listeners can be thought of in terms of human universals as opposed to cultural specifics, see also Mayer, "Preaching Hatred" in this volume.

differently to what Chrysostom says—at least not with the evidence available to us.[120] However, we can say something about some more general widely shared kinds of cultural knowledge that might have had an impact on how some at least in Chrysostom's audiences might have received what he said.[121] For example, it seems likely that many in Chrysostom's audiences would still have been familiar with Homeric texts from formal education, from the theatre and from stories told to them when children. I would thus argue that when many audience members listened to Chrysostom's description of God jumping up from his throne and coming down to earth to "stand in the battle array," they would have thought of the numerous occasions in the Iliad where one of the Olympian gods comes down to earth from Olympus or heaven to intervene in human affairs, especially battle scenes. Thus we hear that "Zeus came down from heaven," that Apollo strode down from Olympus and that "down from the peaks of Olympus [Athena] went darting."[122] Once they are in the human world, these gods and divinities often joined in the human fighting on one side or the other. Thus we have Apollo helping the Trojans by fighting against Patroclus,[123] or we have Poseidon helping Achilles against Aeneas,[124] or we have Apollo attacking the Greeks.[125]

I would argue that Chrysostom could not control how all his audience members actually received what he said and that those who had better knowledge of the stories of the Homeric poems than they did of the Bible, or of Christian doctrine, might well have used these Homeric stories to a far greater degree when they built their own mental representations of God/Christ leaping down to the earthly world from heaven to fight for human salvation. When Chrysostom spoke to them about the incarnate Christ, they might actually have thought of Apollo or Zeus, or at the very least they would have held rather odd images of Christ in which Christian and Homeric/Graeco-Roman elements were blended together. This supports the finding from cognitive science outlined in the previous section of the power of existing knowledge and of the difficulty of transforming how people think. Chrysostom could thus be said to have doubly failed at his goal of teaching the incarnation in that some of them at least might *both* be more likely to see Christ/God in anthropomorphic terms *and* be more likely to fall back on Graeco-Roman conceptions of divinity that were still prevalent in society at the time.

However, to see such "misunderstandings" in negative terms is to miss the point. In my revised model they are what allowed Chrysostom's words to have any impact at all on his listeners because they constituted images made in the minds of the audiences that were related to their own existing cultural knowledge, and thus properly comprehended by those listening to them, and were images that were more natural and

---

[120] The cognitive science used in this chapter explores principles that apply to all "cognitively modern" human minds and does not concern itself with the way gender and class might accept thought processes because these are socio-cultural rather than mental factors. This does not mean these differences weren't there or that I don't think them to be important. It simply means that the methodology I am presenting in this chapter cannot help us to reach them.

[121] From heaven, see Homer, *Il.* 1.190–95 and 11.180–85. From Olympus, see *Il.* 1.40–50, 2.165, 15.145–50, 22.185–90 and 24.120–30. For Mount Ida, see *Il.* 13.15–25, 15.235 and 16.665–75. For gods fighting alongside mortals, see *Il.* 6.698–75, 20.319–30, 21.142–54.

[122] *Il.* 11.180–85, 21.142-54 and 2.165. See also *Il.* 1.190–95 and 11.180–85, 1.40–50, 2.165, 15.145–50, 22.185–90 and 24.120–30. On other occasions, one of the gods is already in the human world on Mount Ida and then moves down from there to where the human action is taking place (*Il.* 13.15–25; 16.665–75; 15.235).

[123] *Il.* 6.698-75.

[124] *Il.* 20.319-30.

[125] *Il.* 21.142-54. For the gods getting involved in the battle in slightly less direct ways, see also *Il.* 22.225; 21.545; 11.70–80.

intuitive than theological concepts and so a better fit with their cognitive predispositions and more easy for them to memorise, make inferences from, use and transmit. This gave a normally complex theological Christian concept a chance to compete with the intuitive, anthropomorphic divine concepts of Graeco-Roman religion, which otherwise would have had a clear cognitive advantage.[126]

4 Final Words: The Way Forward

The vivid language that Chrysostom uses to depict God and Christ in the first two homilies on Matthew make it easier than it often is to apply cognitive theory to his words and to reconstruct audience receptions of what he said. This passage is also striking for the way it tries to teach a key lesson about a theological concept that was the subject of heated debate at the time.[127] However, I would argue that we can make similar points about every occasion where Chrysostom uses analogy with human figures to describe God/Christ, even if the descriptions he gives are less detailed. So for example, in early homilies of the longer series on Genesis Chrysostom repeatedly compares God's acts of creation with the activities of human craftsmen and builders. Thus of Genesis 1:1 ("In the beginning God made heaven and earth") he says:

> But why mention God's creation? Even human arts germane to them are beyond them. Tell me, for instance, how the substance of gold takes shape through the art of mining? Or how the purity of glass comes from sand? … So if [you can't explain] the things which human wisdom devises, thanks to God's loving kindness, why busy yourself, mere mortal, about the things created by God?[128]

Or of Genesis 1:4 ("God saw that the light was good") he says:

> Is it that before the light comes into being he does not know it is beautiful, whereas after its appearance the sight of it shows its creator the beauty of what appears? What sort of sense would this make? I mean, if a man works at some piece of craftsmanship, and before he completes the thing he is making and puts final touches to it he sees the use to which he will put the thing he is making, how much

---

[126] However, as the work of Gervais and his colleagues makes clear, while having concepts of a natural and intuitive nature is necessary for explaining the success of a particular religion, such "content biases" cannot completely explain that success. As they put it, the nature of the religious concepts themselves cannot answer the question of why "belief in God is a powerful force in the world today, and discussion of Zeus is relegated to mythology classes" or why people believe in some divinities but not others despite being able to represent both (Will M. Gervais and Joseph Henrich, "The Zeus Problem: Why Representational Content Biases Cannot Explain Faith in Gods," *JCognCult* 10 [2010]: 383–89; see also Gervais *et al.,* "Cultural Transmission"). Instead we also need to take account of "context biases," the various cultural supports that are given to the dominant beliefs in that culture including the prevalence of a belief, the favouring of a belief by those who are "older, skilled, prestigious and successful," and use of "credibility enhancing displays," to support the belief (Gervais *et al.*, "Cultural Transmission," 392). This allows room for more typical historical explanations such as support from the emperor and his court and from increasingly influential Christian leaders, the growing numbers of Christians, and the displays of adherence to Christianity as seen in the behaviours of Christian ascetics. For a more comprehensive critique of the way cognitive science ignores issues of belief and cultural traditions, see van Slyke, *Cognitive Science.*

[127] In future work I hope to explore further how common such methods for teaching the incarnation are in Chrysostom and how they compare with other methods he uses to teach this doctrine.

[128] *In Gen. hom.* 2.6 (PG 53.28.37–45).

more the creator of all, who by his word brings into being everything from non-being, sees that the light is good before he creates it… This blessed author speaks out of considerateness for the way humans speak and just as people work on something with great care, and when they bring their efforts to completion they parade what they have made for scrutiny and commendation…[129]

His purpose is to show how much more amazing God's acts of creation are than these human acts, but I would argue the human predisposition to conceive of God in anthropomorphic terms explored above would mean that in fact his words in these homilies would have had the opposite effect and caused people to imagine a human-like God creating the world out of pre-existing materials.[130]

There are also occasions when it seems to me that the knowledge that members of Chrysostom's audiences held in their minds would have prevented them from interpreting scripture as he wanted them to. Again in the Genesis homilies, there is the example of the way in which Chrysostom deals with the timing of the creation of the sun in the creation narrative. According to Genesis 5:14 God didn't create the sun until day four, after the creation of the crops. Chrysostom tells his audiences that the reason for this is that God wanted it to be clear that the sun was not "responsible for the germination of the crops" so that they did not assign too much power to the sun and treat it as a deity.[131] The trouble is that the way Chrysostom teaches his audiences about the first four days of creation can be seen to undermine this purpose because he doesn't explicitly clarify that the sun has not yet been created until homily five.[132] For cognitive science, understanding verbal discourse means relating it to our existing knowledge, and human minds tend to assume that scenarios described in literature are like those that they are familiar with until they are told otherwise.[133] Given this, I would argue that members of Chrysostom's audiences would have assumed the sun was created at the same time as the heavens, as described in Genesis 1:1, because this is what they were familiar with from their own world. Why would they conceive of the skies without the sun in it when Chrysostom had given them no explicit instruction to do so? Surely they would have imagined that the sun was there right from the start and, in fact, there are a number of other points in Genesis which might reinforce the idea that the sun was already present. So the line "God said: Let there be light"[134] could again suggest the presence of the sun creating the light, and the repeated line "evening came and morning came"[135] to describe the progress of each day is hard to conceptualise, and so hard to understand, without thinking of human experiences of night turning into day with the

---

[129] *In Gen. hom*. 3.9-10 (PG 53.35.1–17). For other examples, see *In Gen. hom*. 2.11 (PG 53.30.15–25); *hom*. 2.12 (PG 53.31.1–17); *hom*. 4.11 (PG 53.43.45–44.1).

[130] The literature on the power of metaphors, including analogy, and their important role in cognitive processes and understanding is large. Mayer, "Preaching Hatred" in this volume, summarises the debates and provides an introduction to the literature. She agrees that the role of such metaphors should be seen as far more than simple decoration or commonplaces.

[131] *In Gen. hom*. 5.12 (PG 53.52.1–2) and *hom*. 6.12 (PG 53.58.15–35).

[132] Cf. Basil of Caesarea's approach to the problem. Basil uses the second line of Genesis as an occasion to clarify exactly which features of the familiar world were created and which not in God's very first creative act and says explicitly that the heavens "were not lighted around by the moon or the sun" yet (Basil, *Hom. Hex.* 2.1).

[133] Gavins, *Text World Theory*, 10.

[134] *In Gen. hom.* 3.5 (PG.53.34.1–3).

[135] *In Gen. hom.* 3.11, 4.14 and 5.14 (PG 53.35.36-7, 45.9-10 and 52c.38-9).

rising sun, in which the sun figures strongly.[136] This was a problem for Chrysostom because if the sun was present from the start of creation in the understanding of those in his audience, what was to prevent them from also imagining it to have a role in the growth of crops just as they saw it to have in their own world and thus, in turn, to attribute divine power to it? It could thus be argued that here too, the existing knowledge of Chrysostom's audiences would have prevented at least some of them from conceiving of God and his power as he wished and actually reinforced Graeco-Roman conceptions of divinity that Chrysostom was trying to erase and replace.

These are, of course, all isolated passages and more work needs to be done identifying other similar passages and assessing how common they are in Chrysostom's preaching. It will continue to be very hard to say much in detail about audience receptions of Chrysostom's preaching and, as we have seen, cognitive science can only provide us with limited help. However, I think we have shown that cognitive science, and alternative theories of what counts as good communication, provide us with enough ammunition to argue that we do need to shift scholarly assumptions about the way Chrysostom's preaching works and the likely impact that it had so that we can allow ourselves to see points where he might have failed in his explicit intentions or where his words might have unintended consequences. At the same time, what we have found can also cautiously be used to suggest an alternate model of how Christianity spread so successfully than is usually adopted. We can argue that Christianity's success was not so much a result of the fact that its key theologically correct ideas were being transmitted exactly as they were taught by Christian leaders, but rather was a result of the way the human minds of lay Christians created their own varied, more intuitive, and more easily transmittable conceptions of those ideas, and latched on to such images when they heard them from their preacher. In this model, Christianity did not ultimately succeed because it engaged in a Platonic-style dialogue with an audience who understood everything as Christian preachers intended or because it created a "totalizing discourse" shared by all Christians. Rather, it succeeded because the intentions of Christian preachers failed and because preachers could not control exactly how lay Christians heard what they said. Preaching should thus be seen as a form of mass communication to those who received it with active minds according to universal cognitive constraints and by blending it with the cultural and personal knowledge existing in their minds, and that this was precisely the reason it was successful, because this is how true communication and comprehension are defined.

---

[136] For the first example, we can again give some comparison with Basil. His interpretation of the line "Let there be light" does not explicitly state that there was no sun yet, but it does describe in great detail how the whole body of air that made up the heavens became infused with light (Basil, *Hom. Hex.* 2.6). This would have made it much easier for his audiences to understand how there could be light in the heavens without the sun.

Bibliography

Alba, J.W., and L. Hasher. "Is Memory Schematic?" *Psychology Bulletin* 93 (1983): 203–31.

Amirav, Hagit. *Rhetoric and Tradition: John Chrysostom on Noah and the Flood*, TEG. Leuven: Peeters, 2003.

Aulén, Gustav. *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement,* translated by A.G. Herbert. London: SPCK, 1970.

Barrett, Justin L. *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* Lanham, MD–Plymouth: Alta Mira Press, 2004.

Barrett, Justin L., and Frank C. Keil. "Conceptualizing a Non-natural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts." *Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1996): 219–47.

Barrett, Justin L., and Melanie A. Nyhof. "Spreading Nonnatural Concepts: The Role of Intuitive Conceptual Structures in Memory and Transmission of Cultural Materials." *JCognCult* 1 (2001): 69–100.

Bartlett, Frederic. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social-Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932.

Boyer, Pascal. "What Makes Anthropomorphism Natural: Intuitive Ontology and Cultural Representations." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2.1 (1996): 83–97.

----. *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors.* London: Vintage Books, 2002.

Cameron, Averil. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Early Christian Discourse.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Carrié, J-M. "Antiquité tardive et 'démocratisation de la culture:' un paradigm à géométrie variable." *Antiquité Tardive* 9 (2001): 27–46.

Carruthers, Mary. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Clark, Gillian. "Can We Talk? Augustine and the Possibility of Dialogue." In *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, edited by Simon Goldhill, 117–34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

----. "The Ant of God: Augustine, Scripture and the Curriculum." In *Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity,* edited by David Brakke, Deborah M. Deliyannis, and Edward Watts, 151–63. Farnham–Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.

Czachesz, István. "The Gospels and Cognitive Science." In *Learned Antiquity: Scholarship and Society in the Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and the Early Medieval West*, edited by A.A. MacDonald, M.W. Twomey, and G.J. Reinink, 25–36. Leuven: Peeters, 2003.

----. "The Transmission of Early Christian Thought: Towards a Cognitive Psychological Model." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 36.1 (2007): 65–83.

-----. *The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse.* Sheffield: Equinox, 2012.

de Cruz, Helen. "Cognitive science of Religion and the Study of Theological Concepts." *Topoi* 23.2 (2014): 487–97.

de Cruz, Helen, and Johan de Smedt. *A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion.* Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2015.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Gavins, Joanna. *Text World Theory: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Gervais Will M., and Joseph Henrich. "The Zeus Problem: Why Representational Content Biases Cannot Explain Faith in Gods." *JCognCult* 10 (2010): 383–89.

Gervais Will M., Aiyana K. Willard, Ara Norenzayan, and Joseph Henrich. "The Cultural Transmission of Faith: Why Innate Intuitions are Necessary, But Insufficient, to Explain Religious Belief." *Religion* 41.3 (2011): 389–410.

Goldhill, Simon. "Introduction: Why Don't Christians Do Dialogue." In *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, edited by Simon Goldhill, 1–12. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Guthrie, Stewart. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Cognitive Science, Literature and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists.* New York–London: Routledge, 2003.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–1979,* edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, 128–38. London: Hutchinson, 1980.

Harrison, Carol. "The Typology of Listening: The Transformation of Scripture in Early Christian Preaching." In *Delivering the Word: Preaching and Exegesis in the Western Christian Tradition*, edited by William John Lyons and Isabella Sandwell, 62–79. Sheffield: Equinox, 2012.

James, Liz, and Ruth Webb. "To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium." *Art History* 14 (1991): 1–14.

Lawson, E. Thomas. "Cognition." In *The Guide to the Study of Religion*, edited by W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon, 75–85. New York: Cassell, 2000.

Laird, Raymond. *Mindset, Moral Choice and Sin in the Anthropology of John Chrysostom.* Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's Publications, 2012.

Lawrenz, Melvin Edward. "The Christology of John Chrysostom." PhD dissertation, Marquette University, 1987.

Lim, Richard. "Christians, Dialogues, and Patterns of Sociability in Late Antiquity." In *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, edited by Simon Goldhill, 151–72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Long, Alex. "Plato's Dialogues and A Common Rationale for Dialogue Form." In *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, edited by Simon Goldhill, 29–44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Luomanen, Petri, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro eds. *Explaining Christian Origins: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Sciences*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Maxwell, Jaclyn L. *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and his Congregation in Antioch.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Mayer, Wendy. "The Dynamics of Liturgical Space: Aspects of Interaction between St John Chrysostom and his Audiences." *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 111 (1997): 104–115.

----. "John Chrysostom: Extraordinary Preacher, Ordinary Audience." In *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletic,* edited by Mary B. Cunningham and Pauline Allen, 105–137. Leiden: Brill, 1998.

----. "Who Came to Hear John Chrysostom Preach? Recovering a Late Fourth-Century Preacher's Audience." *Ephemerides Theologicae* 76 (2000): 73–87;

----. *The Homilies of St John Chrysostom—Provenance, Reshaping the Foundations*, OCA 273. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2005.

McCauley, Robert, N. *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

McFague, Sallie. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.

Mendels, Doron. *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity: An Essay on Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.

Miller, Patricia Cox. *Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Antique Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Press, 2009.

Mitchell, Margaret M. *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation.* Louisville–London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Pargament, K.I., and D.V. DeRosa. "What Was That Sermon About? Predicting Memory for Religious Messages From Cognitive Psychology Theory." *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 24.2 (1985): 119–236.

Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Pyysiäinen, Ilkka. *How Religion Works: Towards a Cognitive Science of Religion.* Leiden: Brill, 2003.

----. "Intuitive and Explicit in Religious Thought," *JCognCult* 4.1 (2004): 123–50.

----. *Supernatural Agents: Why We Believe in Souls, Gods and Buddhas.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Rumelhart, David E., and Donald A. Norman. "Accretion, Tuning, and Restructuring: Three Modes of Learning." In *Semantic Factors in Cognition,* edited by J.W. Cotton and R.A. Klatzky, 37–53. Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978.

----. "Analogical Processes in Learning." In *Cognitive Skills and their Transmission,* edited by J.R. Anderson, 335–59. Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981.

Rylaarsdam, David. *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Sandwell, Isabella. *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

----. "How to Teach Genesis 1.1–19: John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea on the Creation of the World." *JECS* 19.4 (2011): 539–64.

Shank, Robert P., and Roger C. Abelson. *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977.

Simonson, Peter. *Refiguring Mass Communication: A History.* Urbana–Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Slone, D. Jason. *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Small, Jocelyn Penny. *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Sperber, Dan. "Intuitive and Reflective Beliefs." *Mind and Language* 12 (1997): 67–83.

Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction.* London–New York: Routledge, 2002.

Turner, Mark. *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

----. *Cognitive Dimensions of Social Science.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

van der Paverd, Frans. *St. John Chrysostom, the Homilies on the Statues*, OCA 239. Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1991.

van Slyke, James A. *The Cognitive Science of Religion.* Farnham–Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011.

Whitehouse, Harvey. *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission.* Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004.

Young, Frances M. *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002.