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Metamorphoses in Early Christian Imagination

A Cognitive-Psychological Approach

(Forthcoming in P. Piovanelli, ed., *Proceedings of the Apocrypha Section at the SBL 2004 International Meeting in Groningen*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2005)

Equipped with a general knowledge of religious antiquity, nobody is surprised by the notion that deities can appear in the shape of animals. Zeus changed himself into a bull to abduct Europe, transformed into a white swan to approach Leda, and assumed the form of an eagle to seduce Ganymedes.¹ The Egyptian Thoth most often appeared as an ibis but occasionally transformed himself into a baboon.² The ability of many Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian deities to assume the shape of animals is taken for granted.³

Such ideas, however, are not readily associated with Early Christian religion. In this article I will argue that metamorphosis was not foreign to early Christian thought; quite on the contrary, it played a central role in the thought-world of Christians, and substantially contributed to the dynamic development of the new religion. In order to

¹ E.g., Buxton *; Hard *.

² Encyclopedia *; Shafer *.

³ E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (transl. J. Baines; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 114-7; H. Usener, "Dreiheit," in *Rheinisches Museum* 58 (1903): 1-47, 161-208, 321-62; P.J. Lalleman, "Polymorphy of Christ," in *Acts of John* (ed. J.N. Bremmer; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 97-118 at 111-112.

understand the cognitive appeal of Christ's figure in early Christianity, we will briefly discuss the mental representation of supernatural concepts, with special attention to the representation of death.

An appreciation of the delicate interaction of evolutionary and cultural aspects of human thought underlies my approach to metamorphosis in early Christian imagination. The human mind has been shaped by evolution for tens of thousands of years. Our minds did not develop to think about everything in the world, but primarily to secure our survival amongst a limited set of challenges. Therefore, we are predisposed to pay attention to particular aspects of the world around us (e.g., predators, prey, human faces, depth), and think in particular ways about that information (e.g., fighting, fleeing, cooperating, mating).⁴ Various higher cognitive functions may have emerged from the combination and secondary utilisation of such primary cognitive mechanisms.⁵ Recent cognitive studies of religion argue that our basic religious concepts are related to important mechanisms of our minds.⁶ In the final part of this article, the concepts of death and metamorphosis will be approached from this perspective.

Religion displays a great variation across historical epochs and different cultures. The emergence of new and successful religions, to which Christianity certainly

⁴ Evolutionary psychology examines such aspects of human cognition. A representative study is S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (London: Norton, 1997).

⁵ S. Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 151–216.

⁶ P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (London: Vintage, 2001), 106–54; S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51–79; I. Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 18–22.

belongs, raises the question of the dynamics of cultural transmission: how texts and ideas are handed down to subsequent generations, and, most importantly, how they develop into new texts and ideas. Although this issue lies beyond the scope of this study, it is important to notice that *nature* and *nurture* are not mutually exclusive alternatives. An understanding of religion (at least religions in *real life*) needs both approaches.⁷

1. Jesus Appears as an Eagle⁸

We start our discussion with a passage from the *Apocryphon of John*, probably written in the AD second century.⁹ The text offers a paraphrase of the biblical story of creation. After the rulers and authorities create Adam, the Father gives him Reflection (*επινοια*) as a helper. The Chief Ruler, Yaldabaoth, desires Reflection, but he cannot reach her, as she is hidden in Adam. He therefore creates the woman, whom Adam recognises as his

⁷ For a sketch of the cognitive aspects of early Christian transmission, see I. Czachesz, “The Transmission of Early Christian Thought: Toward a Cognitive Psychological Model,” in *Studies in Religion*, forthcoming.

⁸ Cf. I. Czachesz, “The Eagle on the Tree: A Homeric Motif in Early Christian and Jewish Literature,” in *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome: Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of A. Hilhorst* (ed. G.P. Luttikhuisen and F. García-Martínez; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), 87–99.

⁹ Four Coptic manuscripts contain the *Apocryphon of John*: *Nag Hammadi Codices* III, IV, V, and *Codex Papyrus Berolienensis* 8502. A synopsis with translation is found in M. Waldstein and F. Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John. Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). Greek was the original language of the book. If Irenaeus knew it, it dates to the second century; cf. G. Luttikhuisen, “A Gnostic Reading of the Acts of John,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of John* (ed. J.N. Bremmer; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 119–52 at 124–5.

“fellow-essence.” In the long version of the book, Jesus Christ, the Saviour, teaches the couple:

I appeared in the form of an eagle on the tree of knowledge . . . that I might teach them and awaken them out of the depth of sleep. For they were born in a fallen state and they recognized their nakedness (*NHC* II.23.26–33).¹⁰

The metamorphosis of the Saviour into an eagle is even more spectacular in the *Acts of Philip* 3.5–9.¹¹ When the apostle Philip prays and beseeches the Lord Jesus to reveal himself, suddenly a huge tree appears in the desert. Philip sits down under the tree and begins to eat. When he looks upwards, he catches glimpse of the “image of a huge eagle,” the wings of which are “spread out in the form of the true cross.” Philip addresses the “magnificent eagle,” and asks it to take his prayers to the Saviour. He calls it “chosen bird,” the beauty of which is “not of this place.” Suddenly he realises that it is the Lord Jesus Christ “who revealed himself in this form.” The apostle praises the Lord, and Jesus (still in the form of an eagle) exhorts the apostle.

Other early Christian sources compare Jesus to an eagle. In the early third century, Hippolytus of Rome commented on *Revelation* 12.14:¹² “[The text is about] the

¹⁰ The passage is missing from *NHC* IV,1.

¹¹ Text in F. Bovon et al., *Acta Philippi. Textus* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 89–95. The Greek *Acts of Philip* contains fifteen “acts” plus the martyrdom text. For the dating of the text cf. I. Czachesz, *Apostolic Commission Narratives in the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Ph.D. diss., University of Groningen, 2002), 136, note 1.

¹² “The woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the

two wings of the great eagle, that is to say, the faith of Jesus Christ, who, in stretching forth His holy hands on the holy tree, unfolded two wings, the right and the left, and called to Him all who believed upon Him, and covered them as a hen her chickens.”

In the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* 17–8 (third century)¹³ we read a vision that contains, among others, an eagle. The interpreter later says that the eagle stands for Christ. There are similar visions in *Ezekiel* 17, *4 Ezra* 11–2, and the *Acts of Thomas* 91.

A sermon attributed to Ambrose of Milan (fourth century) explains that the eagle in *Proverbs* 30.18–19 is Jesus, who after his resurrection flew back to the father like an eagle: “Three things, he [Solomon] says, are impossible for me to know; four I do not understand: the track of a soaring eagle, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man in his youth. . . . By the eagle in this text,” the sermon explains, “we have to understand Christ the Lord, who after his venerable resurrection . . . flew back to the father as an eagle, carrying along his prey, that is, man, whom he snatched away from the hands of the enemy.” Ambrose reviews (partly mythological) stories of how the eagle cares for its chicken and applies this to Christ and the Church: “Christ the Lord takes care of his own Church in the same way as the eagle of his nest (of chicken). With the shadow of his wings he protects his Church against the heat of the persecutions; but he throws out of the Church the ones in whom the flame of the faith is weak. . . . Similarly as the eagle devours the serpent and destroys its poison

wilderness” (*New Revised Standard Version*).

¹³ M.R. James’ dating, cf. J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation based on M.R. James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, rev. repr. 1999) 524; F. Amsler, F. Bovon, B. Bouvier, *Actes de l’apôtre Philippe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 128, note 154; idem, *Acta Philippi. Commentarius* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 172.

with its inner heat, also our Christ the Lord destroys sin, the dangerous virus . . . after he has killed the serpent, that is, the devil. . . .”¹⁴

There is also archaeological evidence from the fourth century of the eagle symbolising Christ on the cross. An eagle on a cross is depicted on a sarcophagus and an eagle with a cross on its chest decorates a capital of the fourth century cathedral of Elusa.¹⁵ On a seventh-century Coptic stele from Upper Egypt, Jesus as an eagle sits on top of a cross.¹⁶

The passages in which Christ appears in the form of an eagle raise a number of questions: (1) What is the source of those ideas? Do they rely on earlier examples, or were they created by the authors of the respective texts? (2) Are they isolated cases, or are there more examples of metamorphosis in early Christian texts? (3) What is the function of those passages in early Christian thought? Are they literary devices that embellish the narratives or are they central to the theological concept of Jesus Christ?

The growing number of examples in the third and fourth centuries suggests that comparing Jesus Christ to an eagle became relatively widespread and the authors may have borrowed the motif from each other. However, from the examples it is also clear that the eagle did not just symbolise one thing in the early Church. Instead, it had a range of meanings and functions in different literary and visual contexts. In some texts

¹⁴ *Sermon 46.2*, text in *Patrologia Latina* 17, 716–22.

¹⁵ Th. Schneider and E. Stemplinger, “Adler,” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 1 (ed. Th. Klasuer; Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950), 87–93 at 92; A. Negev, “Elusa,” in D.N. Freedman, ed, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 2, New York, 1992, 484–487 at 486.

¹⁶ Owned by the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, catalogue number 8682. Following Coptic tradition, the cross has the shape of *ankh*, the Egyptian symbol of life.

the eagle is Jesus, in other texts it stands for other heavenly beings. Sometimes Jesus seems to appear in the form of an eagle, at other times, the text should be interpreted as a simile or metaphor. It is obvious that we cannot solve the issue only by concentrating on the evidence of early Christian literature.

2. Homer As a Source of Bird Metamorphoses

The appearance of Jesus Christ in the form of an eagle has direct antecedents in Homer. Gods appear in the form of birds or are compared to birds in a number of Homeric passages.¹⁷ An overview of the most important texts and the scholarly discussion about them will help us better understand the phenomenon in Early Christianity.¹⁸

In two cases, gods sit on a tree in the form of birds, similarly as in the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Acts of Philip: Iliad* VII.58–61 and XIV.286–91. In Book VII of the *Iliad*, Apollo and Pallas Athena agree to stop the fight and let the war be decided in a battle of two. Apollo inspires Hector to suspend the battle, and Agamemnon stops the Achaeans. Then “Athena and Apollo of the silver bow in the likeness of vultures sat on the lofty oak of father Zeus who bears the aegis, rejoicing in the warriors.”¹⁹ The second passage is *Iliad* XIV.286–91. At this place we read that Hypnos climbed the highest tree

¹⁷ Cf. J. Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Mythology* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 155–61; G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 239–40; P. Friedrich, “An Avian and Aphrodisian Reading of Homer’s *Odyssey*,” *American Anthropologist* 99 (1997): 306–20, Appendix.

¹⁸ Cf. Czachesz, “Eagle,” 90-3.

¹⁹ *Iliad* VII.58–61, trans. W.F. Wyatt in LCL.

on Ida to observe Zeus without being seen by him. Hypnos sits there like a bird that has a clear sound.²⁰ Athena transforms into a bird at other times as well. On one occasion she changes herself into a vulture or lammergeyer (*Odyssey* 3.371–2), at another time into a swallow (*Odyssey* 22.239–40).

Birds played an important role in Greek and Roman art, the most important motif being the eagle of Zeus. Birds sitting on posts or idols appear already on Minoan representations: “Birds are seen to perch on the double axes at sacrifice in the Ayia Triada sarcophagus, on the columns from the Shrine of Dove Goddess, and on the heads of the idols from the Late Minoan period.”²¹ A series of Cretan coins from Gortyn shows the union of Europa with Zeus in the form of an eagle.²² On one of the coins, Europa holds a scepter with a bird.²³ Another coin from Asia Minor shows Artemis Eleuthera on a tree.²⁴ In literary texts, Zeus’ eagle sitting on a scepter is mentioned by Pindar, Sophocles, and Aristophanes. Pausanias described several such images at Zeus’ altars,²⁵ and archeological evidence of the theme is abundant.²⁶ In the Roman world, the eagle was the

²⁰ The meanings of neither χαλκς nor κμ ινδς are known. For different ancient and modern explanations, see Pollard, *Birds*, 158–9. More recently see J.N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; repr. with addenda, 1999), 7.

²¹ W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (trans. J. Raffan; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 40–1.

²² A.B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* (3 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 1:528–529, 532–533.

²³ Cook, *Zeus*, 1:529, fig. 399; cf. 1:532.

²⁴ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 86.

²⁵ Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 1.6; Sophocles, fragm. 884 (Radt); Pausanias 5.11.1; 8.31.4; 8.38.7. For Aristophanes, see Pollard, *Birds*, 143.

²⁶ Cf. J.M. Hemelrijk, “Zeus’ Eagle,” in *Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* 76 (2001): 115–31.

most important military symbol.²⁷ The eagle standard (*aquila*) enjoyed religious veneration: it consisted of an eagle with stretched wings and a thunderbolt in its claws, sitting on a post with handles.²⁸

Scholars are divided on the issue whether in Greek and Roman imagination gods actually became birds for a time, or were only similar to birds in some respect. Martin Nilsson, on one hand, claims that Cretan birds were not only attributes of gods, but also their actual forms of appearance.²⁹ He reads Homer against that archeological background, and concludes that in a number of passages gods appear in the form of birds.³⁰ John Pollard distinguishes between “transformations” (e.g., *Iliad* VII.61), “half complete transformations” (e.g., *Odyssey* 5.337), and “mere similes” (e.g., *Iliad* XIII.62f).³¹ He remarks that the Homeric gods rarely appear in their own shape, except when consorting with one another.

Franz Dirlmeier, on the other hand, attempted to dissolve the “phantom” of bird-gods, concluding that all examples of “metamorphosis” in earlier literature could be

²⁷ J. Yates, “Signa militaria,” in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (ed. W. Smith; London: s.n., 1875), 1044–6; A.R. Neumann, “Aquila,” in *Der kleine Pauly*, (ed. K. Ziegler et al.; 5 vols.; Munich: Alfred Druckenmüller [Artemis] 1964–1975), 1:478; Y. Lafond, “Feldzeichen,” in *Der neue Pauly* (ed. H. Cancik and H. Schneider; 16 vols.; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996–2003), 4:458–62.

²⁸ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Words and Deeds* 6.1.11 writes about *sacratae aquilae*. Cf. Neumann, “Aquila.”

²⁹ M.P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (2 vols.; 3rd ed.; Munich: C.H. Beck, 1967), 1:290–2.

³⁰ Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 1:349, note 4.

³¹ Pollard, *Birds*, 154–61.

understood as finding similes referring to the motion of the birds.³² Also Walter Burkert warned against attributing theriomorphic beliefs to the Greeks. In the Minoan-Mycenaean religion, birds could be understood as epiphanies of gods, but “the owl of Athena, the eagle of Zeus, and the peacock of Hera or Juno are little more than heraldic animals for the Greeks.”³³

According to Annie Schnapp-Gourbeillon, no clear-cut border between animal similes and animal transformations existed in Greek thought.³⁴ When the gods appear as humans, sometimes the metamorphosis is so perfect, that the heroes do not recognise them. This metamorphosis is often expressed by the same word (ὄϊκος) that can also express similarity.³⁵ Whereas the appearance of the gods as humans hides them, their subsequent metamorphosis into a bird sometimes reveals their identity.³⁶ Schnapp-Gourbeillon argues that such a fluidity applies not only to gods in Homer but to other characters, as well: “the hero who is compared to a lion is the lion.”³⁷

Given the frequent use of bird metamorphosis in Greek literature, it is quite possible that the surprising appearances of Christ as an eagle in early Christian texts were inspired by Homeric examples. Whether those passages were intended by the authors as similes or transformations, is difficult to judge from the Greek parallels.

³² F. Dirlmeier, *Die Vogelgestalt Homerischer Götter* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1967), 35.

³³ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 65.

³⁴ A. Schnapp-Gourbeillon, *Lions, héros, masques. Les interprétations de l'animal chez Homère* (Paris: Maspero, 1981).

³⁵ *Iliad* XXIV.347; *Odyssey* 13.222. The same word is used in one of the aforementioned examples, *Iliad* VII.59.

³⁶ Cf. *Odyssey* 1.320.

³⁷ Schnapp-Gourbeillon, *Lions*, 189.

3. Christ's Metamorphoses in Early Christian Literature

Although the eagle metamorphoses are perhaps the most astonishing representations of Christ as a self-transforming god in early Christian literature, they are by no means isolated cases. In the apocryphal *Acts of John* 87 (second century), Jesus appears to the heroine first in the shape of the apostle John, than as a young man. In chs. 88-93, John reports various metamorphoses of Jesus.³⁸ He appeared in different forms to John and James at the same time: once John saw him as a handsome man, whereas John as a child; later they saw him as a bald man with long beard and as a youngster, respectively. Jesus also appeared to John in different forms on subsequent occasions. When looking at Jesus, John sometimes saw a young man, sometimes and old one; he was sometimes tall, at other times short; his body felt sometimes hard, sometimes soft. On one occasion, Jesus even rapidly changed his appearance as he turned around.

Similar traditions are recorded in the *Acts of Peter* 20–21 (second century).³⁹ “When deceit was spread,” Peter teaches, “. . . the Lord was moved by compassion to show himself in another form (*in alia figura ostendere*) and to appear in the image of man.” Christ’s metamorphoses was not restricted to the act of appearing in the image of man: “For each of us saw him as his capacity permitted.” Peter refers to the same appearances that are also reported in the *Acts of John*: “He will also comfort you, so that

³⁸ Cf. Lalleman, “Polymorphy,” 97–118; H. Garcia, “La polymorphie du Christ. Remarques sur quelques définitions et sur de multiples enjeux,” in *Apocrypha* 10 (1990): 16–55; Czachesz, *Apostolic Commission Narratives*, 90–118.

³⁹ Trans. J.K. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 413–5.

you may love him, this Great and Small One, this Beautiful and Ugly One, this Young Man and Old Man, appearing in time, yet utterly invisible in eternity . . .” Later, blind women see Christ in different form simultaneously. Some see an old man, whose appearance they cannot describe; others see a young man (*iuuenem adulescentem*) one, still others a boy.

In various Apocryphal Acts, Christ routinely appears as a beautiful young man, or in the form of the protagonist.⁴⁰ In the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* he appears as a ship captain (5, 17) and as a little child (18, 33) and claims he can appear in any form he wishes (18).⁴¹

Christian authors claim that Jesus revealed himself according to the abilities of people.⁴² The *Acts of Thomas* 153 (early third century), speaks about the “polymorphous Jesus” who appears “according to the measure of our manhood.”⁴³ Origen, writing in the same period, repeatedly states this in connection with the synoptic transfiguration narrative.⁴⁴ Finally, in the *Gospel of Philip* 57.29–58.2 (third century) we read: “He (Jesus) did not appear as he was, but in the manner in which they would be able to see him (Ἰησοῦς ἐτοῦ ἡλικίᾳ ἡμετέρας). . . . He appeared to the great as great. He

⁴⁰ For the respective passages, see Lalleman, “Polymorphy,” 109.

⁴¹ Cf. “Polymorphy,” 109.

⁴² Lalleman, “Polymorphy,” 98 and 102.

⁴³ Cf. *Acts of Thomas* 44 and 48.

⁴⁴ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.37: “in the same way you can say Jesus was capable to transfigure [with this transfiguration] before some people, but before others he did not transfigure at the same time.” Idem, *Fragments on the Gospel of John* 119.1–8: “Not all of the disciples enjoyed the transfiguration on the mountain, and not everyone participated in the sight of the resurrection.” Cf. Idem, *Against Celsus* 2.64.

appeared to the small as small. He appeared to the angels as an angel, and to men as men.”

These sources suggest that many early Christians saw metamorphosis as inherent to the nature of Jesus Christ. In recent scholarship, attempts have been made to distinguish between metamorphosis (Christ appears subsequently in different forms) and polymorphy (Christ appears in different forms to different persons at the same time).⁴⁵ For our purposes such a distinction is not necessary: in either case, Christ was thought capable of assuming different forms. After reviewing some of the extra-canonical literature, it is time to examine whether this idea is also present in the writings of the New Testament.

We begin our survey with the well-known hymn of Philippians 2:

Though he was in the form of God,
...
he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
appearing in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself. . . .

This text describes Jesus’ appearance on earth as the transformation of a divine being into a human form. Although we normally do not think of this passage in the context of

⁴⁵ E.g., Lalleman, “Polymorphy.”

metamorphosis, writings like the *Acts of Thomas* obviously connect Christ's descent to earth with his ability to change his form (see above).⁴⁶

Another crucial New Testament passage about Christ's transformation is Paul's discussion of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. To the question "How are the dead raised?" Paul answers by describing the metamorphosis of a seed into a plant:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed. . . . But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind seed its own body. . . . So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown will decay, what is raised is imperishable. . . . If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

What Paul explains about the "spiritual body" can be compared with other texts about the resurrected Jesus.⁴⁷ In John 20.26, the risen Jesus enters a house with the doors shut. According to Luke 24.16, the disciples on the road to Emmaus do not recognise the risen Lord, because, as the text explains, "their eyes were retained from seeing him." Jesus undergoes a metamorphosis in the well-known transfiguration scene of the synoptic tradition (Mark 9.2 and parallels). Here Jesus is reported to have "changed his form (μετεμορφθη) before them." Jesus' clothes become "dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them," and he converses with Elijah and Moses. The resurrected Jesus is described in similar ways in several texts, such as *Revelation* 1.12–16, *Apocalypse of*

⁴⁶ Christ's descent assuming different forms is described in *Ascension of Isaiah* 10.17–11.33.

⁴⁷ Cf. John 12.24, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Peter 6 (ch. 15 in the Ethiopic text), *Acts of Peter* 16, *Acts of John* 90, and *Acts of Barnabas* 3.

In conclusion, Jesus' ability to change his form, in other words, to undergo metamorphosis, is taken for granted beginning with the earliest tradition about his birth, death, and resurrection. We can go a step further and recognise that in Homer, the metamorphosis of gods is frequent, but does not have a central function in the plot. In early Christian narratives, in contrast, Christ's metamorphosis from god into human and from dead into risen becomes a central theme. In the final part of my article I will attempt to answer the question why metamorphosis played such a crucial role in early Christian texts, and put forward the hypothesis that metamorphosis was a key element in the success of early Christian religion.

4. Toward a Cognitive Psychology of Early Christian Metamorphosis Traditions

Strange ideas attract attention and stick to memory. Religion evidently contains strange, attention-grabbing concepts, such as angels walking on a ladder, or creatures composed of human and animal parts.⁴⁸ Not everything goes in religion, however. A comparison of religious traditions shows that religious concepts contain a limited level of "strangeness," and concepts are "strange" in very meaningful ways.

Evolution provided humans not only with specialised cognitive systems to recognise and process relevant information in the environment (see above), but also with a limited set of ontological categories.⁴⁹ A cross-cultural shows that humans differentiate

⁴⁸ Genesis 28.12; Ezekiel 1.5-28.

⁴⁹ S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust. The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

between living and non-living things. The former are subdivided into animate (persons and animals) and non-animate kinds (plants); the latter include artifacts and other substances: LIVING KIND (ANIMATE [PERSON, ANIMAL], PLANT); STUFF (ARTIFACT, SUBSTANCE). Neurological studies have also provided evidence about some of those categories, showing that different brain structures are activated when manipulating different categories.⁵⁰ When a thing in the world is recognised as belonging to one of the ontological categories (all things, in principle, belong to one of them), we intuitively activate various expectations about them:⁵¹ a plant will grow but not move; animals will move but not speak; etc. Religious concepts typically violate such intuitive expectations about ontological categories—they are, therefore, called *counterintuitive concepts*.⁵²

Several studies suggest that violations of ontological categories in religious ideas will be minimal (they are *minimally counterintuitive*) and most of them will involve the category of “person.”⁵³ In fact, the most interesting counterintuitive concepts in most religions are *counterintuitive agents*, that is, gods and spirits.⁵⁴ Gods and spirits are especially important, Pascal Boyer concludes, because we attribute them full knowledge

2002), 96; cf. Idem, *Cognitive Foundations of Natural History: Towards an Anthropology of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵⁰ L.R. Squire and E.R. Kandel, *Memory: From Mind to Molecules* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1999), 89–90.

⁵¹ Actually specific brain areas get activated, such as motoric systems when we see a tool; cf. Squire and Kandel, *Memory*, 90.

⁵² S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 95–100; Boyer, *Explaining Religion*, 70–5.

⁵³ Boyer, *Explaining Religion*, 82–103; I. Pyysiäinen et al., “Counterintuitiveness as the Hallmark of Religiosity,” in *Religion* 33 (2003): 341–55; Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 100–7.

⁵⁴ Boyer, *Explaining Religion*, 155–231, 375–6.

of strategic social information, that is, knowledge of “morally relevant aspects of what we do and what others do to us.” Gods are thus powerful participants in social affairs, who can take our part if we are innocently accused and must be reconciled—in order to avert their anger and regain their support—if we violate the moral standard.

The metamorphosis traditions in early Christianity also serve the purposes of memorability and cognitive appeal, attributing to Christ interesting but minimally counterintuitive features. As early Christian texts remark, Christ appeared to people according to their different abilities (see above). Christ is also ultimately involved in moral affairs. In early Christian texts, the wicked are punished and the good are vindicated, if not in this life, than at the final judgement. So far the analysis of Christ’s metamorphoses confirms the expectations gained from cognitive studies of religion, but they do not really add any new element to them. In other words, if the Christian metamorphoses were just about as good as the metamorphoses of other religions, we did not explain yet the exceptionally dynamic development and long-lasting influence of that particular tradition.

Christ undergoes an exceptional sequence of metamorphoses: from god to human, from human to dead person, and finally from dead person to god. This chain of transformations differs substantially from the story of “dying and rising gods.” The question of what happens after death is one of the deepest and most ancient concerns of human thought.⁵⁵ Apocalyptic Judaism and Early Christianity produced numerous visions of the fate of the dead, which also permeated Western culture and literature.⁵⁶ Religious

⁵⁵ Cf. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of Afterlife* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); A.F. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

⁵⁶ E.g., M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature*

psychology has paid attention to accounts of so-called near-death experiences.⁵⁷ This time we are interested in another cognitive aspect of death: how do people feel and think about other peoples' death?

Thinking about other people is a key function for the human species whose evolutionary success is largely dependent on cooperation.⁵⁸ Humans have complex mental representations (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) about other humans' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. This capacity of modelling others' mental states is called the "theory of mind."⁵⁹ We can also simulate other peoples' thoughts and feelings when they are not around. Children, for example, often talk to imaginary companions. When someone dies, we do not expect the dead person to move or speak. In other respects, however, our mind continues to simulate the dead person's thoughts and feelings. Some people keep talking to a dead relative and have strong feelings of how he or she would think, speak, or act in a given situation.

Therefore, dead people are an easily conceivable form of supernatural agents. In many cultures, indeed, ancestors play a central role in religion. They are very close to ordinary humans, except for a few attributes, such as not having bodies and being

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); J.N. Bremmer and I. Czachesz, eds. *The Apocalypse of Peter* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003).

⁵⁷ For a historical overview, see Bremmer, *Afterlife*, 87–102.

⁵⁸ E.g., P. Hammerstein, ed. *Genetic and Cultural Evolution of Cooperation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); J.L. Sachs et al., "The Evolution of Cooperation," in *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 79 (2004): 136–160; E. Fehr and B. Rockenback, "Human Altruism: Economic, Neural, and Evolutionary Perspectives," in *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 14 (2004): 784–90.

⁵⁹ See recently I. Leudar and A. Costall, eds. *Theory of Mind: A Critical Assessment*. Special issue, *Theory & Psychology* 14/5 (2004): 571–755.

constrained by them in their motion. Our ability to think about supernatural beings in that way is further supported by various observations in our natural environment. Seeds are transformed into plants, eggs into chicken, caterpillars into butterflies. Metamorphoses happen around us, this is exactly what Paul uses in his argument about resurrection.

In a great part of early Christian tradition, Jesus is conceived of as a dead person transformed into an ancestor. This is what enables him to mediate between human and God (who, in contrast, is thought of as a more distant and sophisticated supernatural being). This is also what enables humans to imitate him in his resurrection: humans, as Paul argues, can undergo a similar metamorphosis as Jesus did. The synoptic Jesus calls his followers his family, the Johannine Jesus calls the disciples his friends, and Paul argues that we are, like Jesus, sons of God rather than his slaves. Such a transformation of the relation between humans and God is made possible by Jesus being thought of as an ancestor standing between humans and the higher supernatural beings.

Other, more elaborate theological thoughts about Jesus make use of metamorphoses as well. We have seen that Ambrose viewed Jesus' resurrection and return to his father as the flight of an eagle. A comparable thought is known from ancient Egypt. Each Pharaoh was Horus, and when he died, Egyptians said that the falcon had flown to Heaven and united with the Sun Disk.⁶⁰ In the vision of the heavenly court in *Revelation*, Jesus is a lamb, sacrificed for the salvation of the world. The dividing line between metamorphosis, metaphor, and simile, is as unclear here as in Homeric literature. One can assume that this is precisely because the mental machinery which enables us to think in similes and metaphors is mostly the same as the one enabling us to think about

⁶⁰ Sellers *.

metamorphosis.

The metamorphoses of Christ in early Christian literature can be divided into two sets. On one hand, Christ is believed to undergo metamorphoses which are widespread in the ancient world and other religious traditions: he assumes the form of different people and animals. This makes his figure appealing and memorable, fulfilling different cultural and individual needs. He undergoes, on the other hand, an exceptional sequence of metamorphoses, which makes him a powerful ancestor, a supernatural agent who is approachable and who really matters, capable of mediating between humans and the higher God.

5. Conclusion

Ancient imagination was fascinated by the idea of metamorphosis. Ovid dedicated a whole book to the subject, titled *Metamorphoses*, containing many entertaining examples of gods as well as ordinary people changing their forms. The novel of Apuleius under the same title reports the adventures of the young man Lucius turned into an ass and his return into human shape when initiated into the cult of Isis. The success of those and similar subjects up to modern times shows how deeply the cognitive pattern of metamorphosis is rooted in our minds. The adoption of this mental scheme in early Christian religion was an important factor in its ultimate success in antiquity and as a world religion.