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## **Religious Memory as a Conveyor of Authoritative Tradition: The Necessary and Essential Component in a Definition of Religion**

**ABSTRACT:** In a landmark book published in 2000, the sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger defined religion as a chain of memory, by which she meant that within religious communities remembered traditions are transmitted with an overpowering authority from generation to generation. After analysing Hervieu-Léger's sociological approach as overcoming the dichotomy between substantive and functional definitions, this article compares a ritual honouring the ancestors in which a medium becomes possessed by the senior elder's ancestor spirit among the Shona of Zimbabwe with a cleansing ritual performed by a Celtic shaman in New Hampshire, USA. In both instances, despite different social and historical contexts, appeals are made to an authoritative tradition to legitimize the rituals performed. This lends support to the claim that the authoritative transmission of a remembered tradition, by exercising an overwhelming power over communities, even if the memory of such a tradition is merely postulated, identifies the necessary and essential component for any activity to be labelled "religious".

**KEYWORDS:** *Defining Religion, Tradition, Authority, Zimbabwe, Celtic Shamanism*

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In several publications over the past ten years, I have developed a theory of religion based in part on the work of the French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger. I devoted a section in my book *From Primitive to Indigenous* (2007) in the chapter I entitled “Towards a Socio-cultural, Non-essentialist Interpretation of Religion” to applying Hervieu-Léger’s theory to the development of a definition of religion. I analysed an article she wrote under the title “Religion as Memory” that appeared in a book edited by Jan Platvoet and Arie Molendijk called *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion* (Hervieu-Léger 1999, 73-92) and then I drew out themes from her book first published in English in 2000 under the title *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. Most recently, I proposed a reductive definition of religion, a position in which, following the work of Walter Capps (1995), I identified the *sine qua non* of religion (that without which religion is not religion), as the transmission of an authoritative tradition that is passed on from generation to generation and thereby enshrined in the collective memory of identifiable communities (Cox 2013, 308-23).

In this article, I focus on the idea of memory and belief as employed by Hervieu-Léger, and apply her analysis to two cases derived from my studies in indigenous religions: the first a traditional ritual in honour of the ancestors among a Shona speaking people located in south-central Zimbabwe and then a “neo-shamanic” cleansing ceremony conducted in a class I was teaching on traditional shamanism at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, followed by some other brief examples of contemporary neo-shamanic practices. I have written about the two primary cases I discuss in this article previously (Cox 2008; Cox 2007, 155-6), but I want to re-visit them in a new context and in light of my contention, derived in part from Hervieu-Léger, that the necessary and essential component of religion is constituted by “memory” understood as a conveyor of an overpowering collective authoritative tradition.

### *Danièle Hervieu-Léger and a Restricted Definition of Religion*

In her article appearing in the Platvoet-Molendijk volume, Hervieu-Léger (1999, 77) introduces the section in which she discusses definitions of religion by quoting from Durkheim’s opening statement in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*:

It is necessary to begin by defining what is meant by a religion: for without this, we would run the risk of giving the name to a system of ideas and practices which has nothing at all religious about it, or else of leaving to one side many religious facts, without perceiving their true nature (Durkheim 1915, 23).

Hervieu-Léger (1999, 77) is aware that many social scientists have avoided all definitions of religion, preferring, as she says, “to leave the

'theorizing' to the philosophers". Sociologists of religion, in particular, simply studied as religion precisely those activities "which the society itself designated as 'religious'" (1999, 78). This position, she argues, can no longer be maintained in light of "the modern proliferation of belief" (as witnessed by the upsurge of religious activity internationally) and "the de-regulation of the domain of institutionalized religion" (as evidenced by the emphasis on individual choice in the search for private religious or spiritual meaning) (1999, 78). This does not entail a return to a search for a phenomenological "essence" of religion, but it is necessary to be equipped with a definition of religion "which simply allows for the classification of observable phenomena" (1999, 78).

It is important to underscore that Hervieu-Léger's discussion of the definition of religion was developed in the context of sociological theories of secularization, particularly in light of the argument that was maintained well into the 1960s that religion had entered into the last phases of an inevitable decline as society had come increasingly under the sway of scientific rationalism. Jeffrey Hadden (1987, 588) calls this a forecast "anchored in a broad sweeping theory of secularization, which, in turn, is nested in an even broader theory of modernization." He adds: "secularization ... is ... properly described as a general orienting concept that causally links the decline of religion with the process of modernization" (1987, 598).

Hervieu-Léger (1999, 76) suggests that the predictions of the demise of religion have been proved wrong by the contemporary situation but in a quite ambiguous way. On the one hand, in line with the secularization thesis, society in the West at least has for many years been experiencing the "evaporation of the socio-religious link which once constituted long-term support for the construction of a religious culture encompassing aspects of social life", but, on the other hand, we are witnessing the unexpected or at least unanticipated wide dissemination of religious belief. This latter phenomenon suggests that "religion still speaks ... But it does not speak in those areas where one might expect" (1999, 76), that is, within institutions like churches or mosques or through official channels of the historical religions. Rather, "one discovers its presence, diffuse, implicit or invisible, in economics, politics, aesthetics, in the scientific, in the ethical and in the symbolic" (1999, 76). This wide dissemination of religion in modern life makes defining religion at once extremely difficult, but necessary. The scholar needs to know what to investigate as "religion" when describing and analysing what Hervieu-Léger calls "the diverse surreptitious manifestations of religion in all profane and reputedly non-religious zones of human activity" (1999, 76).

One resolution to the problem of defining religion in modernity is to opt for a quite restricted or substantive definition, one which limits religion to beliefs in supernatural agencies or even to a belief in God. This

confines religion in ways that would exclude what are sometimes called “religion-like” activities as displayed in nationalism, Marxism or even in great sporting events. I discovered recently in my research on “non-religion” among Australian Aboriginal peoples that this restricted or limited definition was precisely the approach taken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics when it formulated the 2011 census question on religion. The ABS defined religion as “belief in a Supernatural Being, Thing or Principle”. For this reason, the ABS refused to classify Marxism as a religion because it lacked “any supernatural or spiritual component”.<sup>1</sup>

The other main way of defining religion is unrestricted or open, when, for example, calling any belief that provides meaning for a person a religious belief. This could include almost anything, such as families, jobs, hobbies or allegiance to ideological causes. The important thing on this, functional, approach to defining religion, is how diffuse and imprecise it is. Hervieu-Léger cites Thomas Luckmann’s (1967) discussion of “invisible religion” as an example of this attitude in which, she says, Luckmann defines religion in a way that encompasses “the entirety of the imaginary constructs whereby society, groups within this society, and individuals within these groups, try to give meaning to their everyday experience” (Hervieu-Léger 1999, 78).

Hervieu-Léger argues that substantive definitions tend to restrict the study of religions to “the historical religions”. This has the perhaps unintended effect of turning students of “religion” into the protectors and guardians of “authentic religion” (1999, 83). This criticism could be levelled at the interpretation given by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which coded, for example, Judaism as “not defined” despite the fact that over 64,000 people wrote in Judaism as their religion on the 2011 Australian national census.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, functional or expanded definitions are so broad, according to Hervieu-Léger (1999, 83), that they “turn out to be incapable of mastering the unlimited expansion of the phenomena they try to account for”. In other words, they become so imprecise that they are tantamount to saying anything can be religion or, as Graham Harvey (2013, 209) argues in his provocative book, *Food, Sex and Strangers*, for religious people, “everything is religious”. Harvey provides a particularly good example of a scholar who advocates a broad, even vague, approach to defining religion, as exemplified in the conclusion to his book where he asserts that religion is about relationality (2013b, 210), and not just or primarily among humans, but includes the relation of human persons to

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/1266.0Main+Features12011?OpenDocument>. [Accessed 15 October 2013].

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/latestProducts/3238.0.55.001Media%20Release1June%202011>. [Accessed 22 April 2014].

“other than human persons” (2013, 202-3). In this sense, “the setting of tables and the washing of dishes after meals” are just as “religious” as the cognitive content of a sermon delivered during a Protestant worship service on a Sunday morning (Harvey 2013, 30).

Hervieu-Léger contends that the problem of defining religion cannot be resolved by siding either with a substantive or functional approach, but by analysing the dynamic transformations that are occurring within society. In this sense, she would agree with Harvey that religion is relational, but unlike Harvey, Hervieu-Léger approaches her definition from an entirely sociological perspective. She does not define religion “ontologically” or “theologically”, or one might argue in the case of Harvey in terms of a particular ideology derived from environmental paganism or a new animism (Cox 2007, 161-3), but practically, as a tool to aid researchers in their attempts “to think socio-religious change as well as to think the modern mutation of religion” (Hervieu-Léger 1999, 84). What we call religion thus must be understood in changing and dynamic social contexts.

Although Hervieu-Léger regards belief as central to what actually is changing and dynamic in social contexts, she prefers to employ the term the “act of believing” to “belief” to indicate that to believe is “belief in motion” (1999, 84). She explains: it incorporates “the practices, languages, gestures and spontaneous automatisms” in which beliefs are inscribed. The student of religion must study “*the mutating structures of believing*” (1999, 84, emphasis in original). This means that the content of religion can no longer be thought of as restricted to a certain way of believing, either excluding or including political, social and economic factors, as required both by substantive and functional definitions. “Religious believing”, she concludes, must be understood as “*a particular modality of the organization and function of the act of believing*” (1999, 87, emphasis in original).

If we follow Hervieu-Léger’s train of thought to this point, we will see that the question confronting scholars is not, for example, could a modern spectator sport like football be considered a “religion” any more than it asks if modern expressions of Christianity, Judaism or Islam can be considered a religion. According to Hervieu-Léger, the important issue for a socially-embedded modern definition of religion depends not on the now dated debate between substantivists and functionalists, but it pivots on the question of legitimization. How is the act of believing legitimized? And here Hervieu-Léger arrives at the essential and necessary condition for religion to exist in any human community: “There is no religion without the explicit, semi-explicit, or entirely implicit invocation of *the authority of a tradition*; an invocation which serves as support for the act of believing (1999, 87-8, emphasis in original). On this accounting, what makes something religious depends on whether or not the forms of believing invoke or “justify themselves, first and foremost, upon the claim

of their inscription within a *heritage of belief*" (1999, 88, emphasis in original).

These considerations lead to Hervieu-Léger's definition of religion "as an ideological, practical and symbolic framework which constitutes, maintains, develops and controls the consciousness (individual or collective) of membership to a particular heritage of belief" (1999, 88). Religious groups define themselves "objectively and subjectively as a *chain of memory*, the continuity of which transcends history" (1999, 89, emphasis in original). By relating to a chain of memory, religious communities collectively share in acts of remembrance of the past which give "meaning to the present" and contain the future (1999, 89). She concludes:

Insofar as transmission [of the tradition] is bound up within the processes of elaboration of this chain of memory whereby a group of believers becomes a religious group, transmission is the very movement itself whereby the religion constitutes itself in time as a religion: it is the continuing foundation of the religious institution itself (1999, 90).

Based on Hervieu-Léger's sociologically inspired definition of religion, I contend that the necessary or indispensable condition for religion to be present in any human activity, *its fundamental defining characteristic*, requires the existence of an identifiable community, which is constituted by its being bound by and subservient to an overpowering authoritative tradition that is passed on from generation to generation. This restricted definition is sociological and culturally based rather than theological or quasi-theological (as in most substantive definitions). It does not depend on belief in supernatural entities or refer to a postulated transcendental object towards which the community directs its attention. This definition is limited entirely to the socially sanctioned authority of a tradition that exercises overwhelming power over members of identifiable communities. In this sense, it is not narrow by being tied substantively to a particular belief in supernatural agents nor is it so broad as to include nearly everything, as in functional definitions. My definition, derived from Hervieu-Léger, in this sense is determined by sociological factors that circumscribe and delimit specific and identifiable communities.

### *The Application of Hervieu-Léger's Definition to Contemporary Contexts*

It is in contemporary ritual contexts that the mutating tradition is most visible, where its authority is underscored most forcefully and through which it is transmitted with an overwhelming power. This is because in

rituals the transmission of the tradition is symbolized by direct contact with its authoritative source. In rituals, the symbols of the tradition are visible, and sometimes capable of being touched, tasted, smelled or heard. In what follows, I will exemplify this interpretation of the transmission of an authoritative chain of memory as the necessary and essential component of religion by examining two quite different social and ritual contexts, one drawn from the indigenous religions of Zimbabwe and the other from an interview with a neo-shamanic practitioner operating in the north-eastern United States, who demonstrated his teachings in a classroom by performing a cleansing ritual.

I begin by recounting a ritual recorded by Cleophas Gwakwara, who was one of my students in a course I taught on the phenomenology of religion in the University of Zimbabwe in 1991. After having provided my students with a series of lectures and readings on the phenomenology of religion, I gave them the assignment of observing a traditional African ritual of their choice using the phenomenological method. They were to take particular care to suspend their personal judgements in so far as possible, to write an objective description of the rituals and then to record the feelings they experienced during the ceremony. I have published edited versions of the students' descriptions, with their permission and by crediting each by name, in my book *Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions* (1998). My original discussion of Gwakwara's ritual aimed at explaining how it could be interpreted by and placed within the classifications myth and ritual according to the phenomenological method in the study of religion. I want to re-visit Gwakwara's description in this article in light of my claim, following Hervieu-Leger, to have identified the necessary and essential component without which religion is not religion.

Gwakwara described a ritual called *bira* in the Shona language, which refers to a regular ritual undertaken by members of extended families to honour their ancestors. Such rituals are required to maintain good relations with the ancestors and do not occur necessarily because a crisis has occurred. Preparations include informing not only members of the extended family that the ritual will be performed, but also the ancestors themselves. The purpose for conducting the ritual normally is preventative, to ensure that the ancestors continue to care for, protect and guide their descendants. Rituals of honour to the ancestors acknowledge that a reciprocal relationship exists between the community and the ancestors. Not only do the people need the protection of their ancestors to avoid misfortunes and the interference of malevolent spirits, but the ancestors also need their descendants to remember, honour and communicate with them. This exemplifies what the African scholar of religion, J. S. Mbiti (1969, 25), calls the relationship between the living and the "living dead".

The ritual described by Gwakwara occurred in a region in south-central Zimbabwe near the Daramombe mountain range in a village called Gonamombe. This is located among the Shona-speaking Karanga people, approximately 180 kilometres south of the capital, Harare. Gwakwara's account is quite detailed and thus I will summarize the main elements of the ritual and towards the end of this article draw out some implications for my restricted definition of religion.<sup>3</sup>

Gwakwara tells us that the *bira* ritual he observed was carried out in the family homestead of the headman. In traditional Shona culture, a headman is an official in charge of a number of villages that cluster around him, but he is always subordinate to a chief. The headman is responsible for the welfare of the villages over which he is responsible. He must ensure that those living in the villages have enough food, that land is distributed fairly, that social harmony prevails and that any disputes between families are resolved. The headman may need to take disputes to the chief, and when these involve problems between different villages in the chief's domain, the headman will represent the concerns of one of his own villages at the chief's court (Cox 2007, 126-7; Bourdillon 1987, 57-8). Extended families live in homesteads within villages and are organized hierarchically according to a patrilineal system. It is the ambition of every man to establish a line of descendants in order to obtain seniority and to be guaranteed of becoming an ancestor spirit after he dies.

A week before the ritual was to take place, according to Gwakwara's account, the ancestors were informed that the ritual was to take place and that traditional beer would be brewed to honour them. Gwakwara recounts how the headman stood in the middle of the homestead, sprinkled some *bute* (tobacco snuff used in rituals to attract ancestors) on the ground and said: "To all those who are down, the fathers, the mothers and those beyond our reach, your children have thought of giving you a brew ... that you may not turn against us saying that we did not inform you." He then took a cupful of water and poured it into a basket containing rapoko seed, a small reddish grain also known as finger millet, which is used in brewing traditional beer. The fermentation process for the beer takes about a week, is overseen by post-menopausal women and produces a grainy, light brown coloured alcoholic liquid.

Gwakwara then describes the ritual itself, which he says was preceded the night before by singing and dancing that went on until daylight. He notes that a particular song was sung repeatedly, which went as follows:

The elders need those who are gathered,  
The elders need those of Gonamombe,

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<sup>3</sup> The full text of the ritual is recorded in Cox 1998, 213-15. My interpretation of the ritual description occurs in Cox 1998, 106-111.



The elders love us of one country,  
The elders do not live where they are not gathered,  
They do not like those who kill each other.

Gwakwara observes that there was one woman who danced all night, "and you could hear people say, 'Do not play with Bazvi'".

On the day of the ritual, early in the morning, people gathered at the cattle kraal. The headman pointed with his walking stick at a big black bull and said: "All those gathered here, this is our uncle, Bazvi, our elder, our leader, for whom we all have gathered here. What is left is for the brothers-in-law to do their duty." It should be noted that in traditional Zimbabwean culture a bull normally is dedicated to the ancestor spirit of a senior elder, and is sacrificed in the ancestor's honour during the ritual. In response to the headman's announcement, Gwakwara reports that all the people clapped their hands in a rhythmic way as certain women danced around the kraal. The people continued singing, as they returned from the kraal to the homestead.

The headman then gathered in front of the people, again took the tobacco snuff, sprinkled it on the ground and proclaimed: "To those who are below, your children are gathered here. Lead us as we enter into praising you for keeping us in one good piece". This signalled that the first pot of beer should be brought out. The headman took a gourd shaped like a ladle and splashed beer on the ground and declared: "This is your beer. No one has ever tasted it before you. Drink this and your children will be happy." The people responded in a traditional manner with slow clapping of their hands. Following this, the bull was killed by the sons-in-law, again according to customary tradition. Later, the meat from the bull was cooked and the people were divided into groups according to a strictly controlled social hierarchy: "The sons-in-law sat together. Fathers-in-law sat in the shade of a mango tree forming their own distinct group. The 'owners of the home' sat in a hut."

People ate and drank beer well into the afternoon. Then an old woman stood up and pointed towards a hill called Gwindingi as the people sang:

The bees sting.  
Take my arrow; I want to go. The sting. Oh, chief! Oh, chief.  
Gwindingi has a lion that kills.  
I want to go.  
Beware! Gwindingi has a strong lion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In Shona language, a territorial spirit, called *mhondoro*, often associated with a particular mountain, is translated as lion. Bourdillon (1997, 253) explains that the *mhondoro* refers to the "belief that certain powerful spirits, particularly the spirits of departed chiefs, take the form of or take possession of young lions".

Gwakwara says that “singing reached a peak” when the people joined in the chorus:

Spirits come back, oh, spirits, come back.  
Greetings to you *sekuru* [a word referring to a respected elder]  
We receive you happily, man.

This was the cue for the old woman who had pointed towards Gwindingi Mountain to become possessed of a family ancestor called Bazvi. Gwakwara observes: “She could jump sky-high as if the ground were hot. She would rush as if she wanted to go out or charge backwards before she fell into a squatting position”. As is normal with spirit mediums, the possessed woman carried a *tsvimbo* (walking stick), which symbolizes the authority of chiefs, headmen and elders and is used by spirit mediums under possession to indicate they have taken on the personality and assumed the role of an important ancestor. The possessed woman pointed with her walking stick “three times downwards, once towards Gwindingi Mountain and once upwards”. The woman was no longer walking and talking like a woman, but had adopted the characteristics of a man. She was now transformed by possession into the ancestor Bazvi, which was confirmed by the costume she had put on: a black and white cloth draped around her shoulders, a baboon skin hat placed on her head and a smoking pipe which she put in her mouth. One senior man shouted out: “You have come old man. We see you. We are also very happy.”

The possessed woman (now Bazvi) joked with the people, telling the old man who had shouted out that he would cut off his testes. He then called for his wife to come forward. An old woman approached Bazvi as he declared: “This is my wife and I love her. Today we are going to sleep together!” And then he joked about beating her “brown buttocks” and made other comments that in normal situations would be considered rude and anti-social. Gwakwara observes that the people “gasp in surprise” at such language. Bazvi concluded by explaining that his jokes indicated that he was happy with the ritual and then promised to “tell Nyakuvamba” (the founding ancestor)<sup>5</sup> “that your children still remember you”. He then told them, “I am not here for long and am already about to leave”. This prompted one elder to respond to Bazvi: “As you said, you are about to leave. Our contribution to you, Bazvi, is this: take this pot and drink with your children!” Bazvi began drinking the beer, sharing it with the people and declared, “I am leaving, my children. Thank you.”

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<sup>5</sup> *Kuvamba*, translates into English as “beginning” with the prefix *nya* designating “owner of”. Thus, I am interpreting the word to mean “the one who was at the beginning” or the founding ancestor.

He then sneezed violently, had what appeared to Gwakwara to be convulsions and fell down on the ground. Shortly afterward, the old woman who had been possessed by Bazvi regained consciousness and asked what had been happening. No one told her, but they just gave her some beer. The people danced, sang and drank beer well into the night.

The *bira* ritual formally concluded the next morning when family members shared in eating a pot of rapoko sadza (resembling thickened porridge) with the intestines of the bull that had been slaughtered. In addition, a clay pot of beer and meat was put on the outskirts of the homestead as a way of sharing with those who were not related to the family for whom the ritual was conducted. Some of the beer and meat was also left for what Gwakwara calls “the spirits that move around the air”, which would have referred to non-ancestral spirits or ancestor spirits of other families, who potentially could be troublesome. It was only after the sharing of the beer and meat with the non-family members and non-ancestral spirits that the people dispersed and the ritual was finished.

### *A Neo-shamanic Cleansing Ritual*

I turn now to consider another case that illustrates my interpretation of religion, but from an entirely different context and cultural setting, that of a neo-shamanic ritual conducted by Lenny Staerk, who promoted himself as a Celtic shaman, operating out of Burlington, Vermont in the north-eastern part of the United States. After seeing his advertisement in a free publication listing resources for numerous “new age” practitioners, I invited Lenny to speak to members of a class I was teaching on traditional and contemporary shamanism during the summer session 2001 at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Prior to his speaking to the class, I interviewed Lenny asking him how he had become a shaman, what sorts of approaches he uses in his shamanic practices and how he understands the cosmology of Celtic shamanism.<sup>6</sup>

Lenny, who is blind and at the time was in his mid-forties, explained that even when he was a boy he sensed the presence of animal spirits around him. He referred to one incident in particular when an eagle flew over him. As the eagle approached, he felt strongly that the bird wanted to communicate with him. Since he became blind, he realized that the eagle was granting him a different kind of vision that would allow him to see into realities that most people cannot visualize. In this deeply spiritual sense, most people are blind, whereas he possesses perfect vision of another kind. This early sense of calling was confirmed when he attended courses in Core Shamanism led by Michael Harner, founder of

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<sup>6</sup> Interview J. Cox with L. Staerk, 25 July 2001, Hanover, New Hampshire.

the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, and later workshops focusing on Celtic shamanism conducted by a pioneer in this field, Tom Cowan. In his interview with me, Lenny referred to Cowan's book, *Fire in the Head* in which Cowan (1993, 7) describes contemporary forms of Celtic shamanism as retaining "the vestiges of an older, deeper stratum of belief". This is similar to the claim I discovered during the same summer session in 2001 that was being made in the literature of a related neo-shamanic training institute, the Lightgate Learning Center in Thetford, Vermont, which described its sessions on trance dance as replicating a practice that "has existed for over 40,000 years" and has been practised by people "all over the world, independent of religion and culture" (Cox, 2007: 156).

In his interview with me, Lenny Staerk explained that Celtic cosmology consists of three levels, an upper world, a middle world and an underworld. These three levels are connected by "the Great Tree", in which a large number and variety of beings can be found, such as animals, birds and "strange creatures". These beings can be mastered by the shaman and used to help people, depending on their particular problems and levels of understanding. He explained that the animals of the upper world are healing spirits, which he normally uses in his own healing sessions. The middle world is our world, but he can see and detect spirits in our world that are invisible to most people. Occasionally, he has to go to the lower world, but that is a dangerous place and needs visiting only in extreme circumstances. By using his powers as a shamanic traveller, he is able to traverse between the cosmic regions and employ most appropriately those spirits that can help the clients who come to him with various problems.

When he spoke to my class on shamanism at Dartmouth College,<sup>7</sup> Lenny began by explaining his background and he repeated to the students, who numbered eleven, what he told me about the different levels in the shamanic cosmology. He told the students that, just like the eagle had been his power animal, each one of them could contact their power animal to help them resolve any problem they were experiencing, to give them direction or simply to be with them. Once the power animal had been identified, they could use the same techniques by themselves to contact the animal, or sometimes other animals, to help them in any situation. Lenny showed the members of the class his drum, which he uses to summon spirits, power animals and, at other times, to ward off unwelcome or troublesome spirits. The drum was single-headed, approximately one metre high and one-third metre in diameter (3 feet by one foot), and had a cowhide cover. Lenny then demonstrated various forms of drumming to the students, indicating that the rhythm was related to the purpose of the meditation, sometimes fast, sometimes slow and

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<sup>7</sup> This occurred on the afternoon of 25 July 2001 at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

deliberate. He then appeared concerned or even disturbed and announced to the class that he needed to use the drum to cleanse the room of unwanted spirits, which he said could disturb his talk to the class. He walked to a far corner of the room by a window, lifted his drum in an upward and downward movement and began beating in a distinctive rhythm. He tapped the drum slowly three times, paused and repeated the same action for two or three minutes. Although Lenny did not explain to the class the significance of these actions, according to John Matthews (1991: 121), in Celtic tradition, beating the drum slowly three times indicates that the shaman is communicating with spirits of the underworld whose presence needs to be neutralized. As I noted, Lenny believed that the spirits of the lower world were dangerous; he also believed that they oftentimes appeared as monsters and could interfere with normal life functioning.

After Lenny had completed the drumming ritual, he was quiet for a few moments and then sat down. He told the class that the room was now safe and he could proceed. At this point, one of the male students in the class stood up and left the room. Lenny heard him leave and told us not to be worried. He assured us that the boy would be fine. He then went outside and called for the student, who came to him. The class could see Lenny and the student through a window, talking to each other. We observed the boy reaching out to touch a large tree, which he seemed to be addressing. Lenny motioned to the class to come outside to the tree. He said that we could talk to the tree, embrace it and learn to be friends with the squirrels that climb up it or to draw on the wisdom of the birds that dwell in its branches. Lenny abandoned any further plans to formally address the students and did not return with us to the classroom to continue any further instruction. Instead, standing beside the tree, he urged each member of the class to touch the tree and feel the power of the animals that were attached to it.

The day after the class concluded, I asked the boy who had left the room to come to see me. I wanted to de-brief him and try to understand what had happened. He indicated that he thought he was responsible for the need Lenny felt to cleanse the room of disturbing spirits, but when Lenny came to him outside, he felt great calm. He said that Lenny was telling him that he could communicate with the spirit of the tree and not to be afraid of the animals that wanted to contact him. The student told me that a squirrel had approached him, brushed his head with his tail and had become his power animal. The cleansing ritual that Lenny performed, according to the student, had affected him directly and had made him feel released from the influence of the spirits that were disturbing him.

In subsequent years of teaching the course in shamanism at the University of Edinburgh, I have invited various shamanic practitioners to lead the students in experiential learning exercises. On several occasions,

this has been conducted by my former PhD student, MaryCatherine Burgess, who has written about Celtic shamanism and its relation to core shamanism in the tradition of Michael Harner (Burgess 2008). During the sessions she conducted in my classes, MaryCatherine would introduce the students to shamanic drumming, teach the members of the class how to seek for and find a power animal and how to use the animal to help with any problems or to act as a guide. At a one-day conference entitled “Indigeneity Goes Global”, which was held at the University of Edinburgh in May 2014, MaryCatherine and a representative from an Edinburgh-based shamanic group opened the event by leading the participants in the workshop through a ritual honouring the spirits of the cardinal directions. This was accompanied by MaryCatherine drumming to a constant rhythm, while the practitioner first faced the east, where, she exclaimed, the sun rises and thus is the source of inspiration and originality. The practitioner then turned in a southerly direction, to which she attributed the spirit of playfulness and relaxation. Then, turning towards the west where the sun sets, she announced this is where intuition and dreams come from. Finally, she faced the north, which she said is the source of cold, but also of wisdom and clarity. She honoured and praised the spirits of each direction and welcomed their presence in the room.<sup>8</sup>

In each case, from Lenny Staerk to MaryCatherine Burgess and her Edinburgh-based shamanic colleague, an appeal was made to an ancient legitimizing tradition, a point that is made central to the analysis of shamanism in the academic work written by MaryCatherine Burgess.<sup>9</sup> This assertion of links to an ancient tradition is confirmed by numerous websites devoted to informing the public about various forms of shamanism. For example, on her website, Cynthia Danielson, a practising Celtic shaman, has written an article entitled “Introduction to Celtic Shamanism” in which she asserts:

Shamanism is the oldest spiritual discipline on this planet. No matter what spiritual path, religious doctrine, dogma, tradition, myth, faerie tale, belief or faith you find – if you dig deep into the roots of the tradition until our fingers are covered with rich black soil, you will find shamanism there. It is the foundation of all everyone believes in”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Opening ceremony at the workshop, “Indigeneity Goes Global: An Interdisciplinary Workshop”, New College, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, 29 May 2014.

<sup>9</sup> In *A New Paradigm of Spirituality and Religion* (2008) Burgess devotes her second chapter, which is called ‘Seeking a New Definition of Religion’, to analysing Hervieu-Léger’s “chain of memory” as a key element within her own paradigm for relating spirituality to religion.

<sup>10</sup> Danielson, C. An Introduction to Celtic Shamanism. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.angelfire.com/ne/spiraltiger/articles/celtic1.html> [Accessed 28 August 2014].

This is quite similar to the assertion of the Lightgate Learning Center in Thetford, Vermont that “trance dance is 40,000 years old”, a claim that echoes the appeals to the legitimizing authority of tradition by many practising contemporary shamans, who assert that the rituals in which they participate are derived from traditions that are rooted in age-old, universal human spiritual experiences (See Jakobsen 1999, 167-88).

### *Implications for Defining Religion as a Chain of Memory*

These two very contrasting descriptions, one in the context of a traditional ritual honouring ancestors in south-central Zimbabwe and the others exemplifying how contemporary shamans perform cleansing and healing rituals, either for individuals or among groups in modern Western situations, point towards several components that support Hervieu-Leger’s definition of religion. In each case, there is an appeal to a legitimizing tradition, stretching back in time to preceding generations, constituting a “chain of memory”. The authority is dramatized and reinforced in each case by the ritual performances.

In the ritual organized by the senior elder in the village of Gonamombe, Zimbabwe, the elder’s recently deceased ancestor speaks directly to the people. He is seen and heard, can even be touched. The ancestor’s message, although down to earth and sometimes humorous, is taken with absolute seriousness by the community, which believes that if the ritual is not completed successfully, a series of misfortunes could begin to plague them. In this sense, the ritual performance conveys an overwhelming authority which binds the community together and is used to explain events directly affecting collective well-being. The ancestor spirit, who represents the most senior elder in the community, embodies and symbolizes traditional authority as represented in the hierarchy of the living community. The traditional social patterns with their strictly delineated and understood roles are exactly replicated in the spirit world. Senior ancestor spirits take overall responsibility for the welfare of the extended family, but other spirits that correspond to aunts, brothers, brothers-in-law and so on also behave in the spirit world as ancestor spirits with the same functions they had when they were alive, but with greater powers. This suggests that an all-encompassing authoritative tradition operates within the society, which is re-enforced by regularly repeating rituals that cement relationships between the community and a parallel and interpenetrative spiritual world.

Without this emphasis on an overarching authoritative tradition, the events occurring within the Zimbabwean *bira* ritual could not be classified as “religion”. This is because without the legitimizing authority

conveyed in the tradition, which had been passed on from generation to generation, the ritual would not have been binding on the community nor would it have supported the belief-system which gave it meaning and explained actions aimed at preserving community stability and avoiding misfortune and suffering. It is only because the message was delivered in the ritual with the force of the authoritative tradition rooted in and re-enforced in the memory of the community, as evidenced in the songs sung during the ritual, that it could provide a frame of reference through which the community could make sense of what ensured their continued health and well being. Without the tradition, which legitimized the authority of the ritual, the ritual itself would have been reduced to individual interpretations of its meaning and relegated at best to a kind of entertainment or play-acting. The fact that the authority transmitted could be traced back in time to the source of the tradition as demonstrated by reference to Nyakuvamba, the first ancestor who established the people in the first place, is what gave the ritual its irreducibly religious element.

In the case of the cleansing ritual led by a neo-Shamanic practitioner, the authority of the ritual event was legitimated by an appeal to a postulated ancient, universal tradition which was related explicitly to Celtic traditions. Lenny Staerk's references to an ancient Celtic cosmological scheme were learned from teachers who claimed to have tapped into the wisdom of ancient Celtic ancestors, who themselves travelled between the cosmic realms, encountered various animal spirits and experienced renewal as a result. Without the "chain of memory" linking what went on in a classroom in Hanover, New Hampshire with an archaic, primordial and universal healing ritual, for Lenny Staerk, the meaning of what turned out to be a spiritually healing event for an individual member of the class would have been trivialized. By appealing to a postulated legitimizing authority, Lenny Staerk could claim a power over the members of the class that had been transmitted not simply by an experienced and trained shamanic practitioner, but by generations of humans and spirits whose presence was invoked in the ritual itself.

Lenny Staerk's shamanic cleansing ritual relied on spiritual agents that were closely aligned with nature as part of the Middle World and linked to the Upper and Lower Worlds through the Great Tree. The members of the class were encouraged to contact and engage with animals or birds, but these were seen as transitional if any of the students wanted to go further into shamanic practices by tapping into a vastly deeper deposit of spiritual resources. The important factor in the entire event, that which gave the Celtic shaman his authority, was not derived from his references to spiritual agents or forces, but resulted directly from his claim to unite the participants with age-old practices of human communities, something which he had experienced personally. The students were assured that if they contacted their power animals, they would be drawing



energy from a source that had been present since the dawn of human life itself, a claim, as we have seen, that has been made by numerous contemporary shamans. It does not matter that this appeal to tradition is entirely postulated, one might even say “invented”. For our purposes, it is by resorting to the transmission of an authoritative tradition that contemporary Western shamans legitimize their rituals and practices, an act which defines the fundamentally “religious” dimension of their work.

### *Modernity and Tradition: Implications for the Study of Religion*

These appeals to an authoritative tradition in the Zimbabwean *bira* ceremony and in the cases of neo-shamanic cleansing and welcoming rituals occur fully within modernity. They represent Hervieu-Leger’s “mutating structures of believing”, but at the same time refer to the collective memory of the past which in turn affects the present experience of the adherents and in some sense directs their future. In the case of the Zimbabwean ritual, tradition is used to re-enforce the authority of the elders and their lineage, but it does so in the context of changing political and economic threats to that authority. The collective need of the people in village homesteads to identify with the tradition is challenged by numerous social forces, including modern political agendas, Christianity, Western education and Western medicine. These factors suggest that the contemporary expression of a longstanding ancestral observance is fully religious, not because the focus of the ritual is on an ancestor spirit (a substantial definition) nor because it provides some meaning for participants (a functional definition), but because there is an explicit invocation of the authority of the tradition on which the community depends for its collective identity and which is intended to ensure the perpetuation of its social and cultural institutions.

The relationship of Lenny Staerk to the students in my class and my references to other neo-shamanic practitioners, of course, are fully modern examples of the contemporary search for individual meaning, the aim of which, in Hervieu-Leger’s words, is to fulfil “the self-development of the individual adherent” (1999: 79). This, however, is not what makes the contemporary shamanic drumming and meditative practices religious. They provide examples of religion because each group that gathers, such as the students in the classroom or the participants in the one-day conference in Edinburgh, who possess only a temporary collective identity, are bound by an explicit appeal to a legitimizing authority – the authority of an age-old shamanic tradition, which connects the participants to a an alleged common and universal human heritage. This represents an act of believing, as Hervieu-Leger has argued, that is

connected inextricably to the working out of “a chain of memory” that in itself constitutes identifiable communities as religious groups.

My two examples of the necessary and essential component in a definition of religion are indeed just two cases, but they exemplify the wider argument based on Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s insightful sociological analysis that there is no religion without the “invocation” of the authority of a tradition (1999: 88). By arguing that without an overpowering authoritative tradition religion is not religion, I have avoided the dichotomy posed by substantive and functional definitions of religion by embedding the academic study of religion in socio-cultural contexts with the happy consequence (quite intended) of removing the discipline we call religious studies from its distorting and perhaps fatal entanglement with theological and confessional interests.

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