

## Proposal for paper

Conference on *Interpreting Rituals:  
Historiographical Perspectives and Pluralistic Contexts*  
(Leiden University, October 29-31, 2018)

**Title of the paper:** *Modes of religiosity and the history of Jewish rituals*

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## Abstract:

Lawson and McCauley (1990) developed a formalism, inspired by Chomskyan syntax, describing the participant structure of a religious ritual. Based on this approach, they propose in their 2002 book a theory of how a balanced ritual system should look like, including both frequent, low-arousal, special-patient/special-instrument rituals, and infrequent, high-arousal, special-agent rituals. Whitehouse expands this idea further into the “modes theory of religiosity”. Both McCauley and Lawson (2002) and Whitehouse (2004) build on Whitehouse’s earlier fieldwork observing a splinter-group within a cargo cult in Papua New Guinea, which illustrates how the two kinds of ritual systems, or the two modes of religiosity clash.

Earlier, I have argued (Biró 2013) that traditional rabbinic Judaism lacks special-agent rituals, if we adhere strictly to the definition of Lawson and McCauley. In fact, this statement is only true for the theologically (halakhically) correct representation of the rituals, from which popular interpretations might diverge. Still, I suggest that mainstream Judaism has always maintained an unbalanced ritual system, which is predicted by the McCauley-Lawson model to exhibit the “tedium effect”, and to lead to the emergence of a “splinter group” (in a technical sense). In my talk, I shall demonstrate how various developments in the history of Jewish rituals fit into this scheme. Most notably, both the Hasidic *tish* and the changing role of the rabbi in the non-orthodox world will be presented as attempts in a pluralistic context by an unbalanced ritual system to introduce more special-agent rituals.

## References

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- Lawson, E. Thomas, and Robert N. McCauley. *Rethinking religion: Connecting culture and cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- McCauley, Robert N., and E. Thomas Lawson. *Bringing ritual to mind: Psychological foundations of cultural forms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Whitehouse, Harvey. *Modes of religiosity: A cognitive theory of religious transmission*. Rowman Altamira, 2004.