

RELIGION AND RITUAL

Introduction

From the myriad instances of what ordinary people call religion, we can define it as concepts or ideas and the practices associated with them. These practices hypothesize reality beyond that which is instantly available to the senses. Religion, thus, is a type of worldview; a collective picture of reality created by members of a society, and exists in many forms. As time passes and cultures change, religions evolve and change as well. Some popular present day religions include Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism.

Religions have different rituals and practices that accompany and highlight religious experience. Familiar examples in the United States include attending church, praying, baptism and other rituals that have become very ingrained in the western culture as part of the Christian religion. For example, American Christians pray before a meal, in time of grief and guidance, for a friend or family member and before and after waking up. However these rituals are only a very small part of the vast diversity of practices that religions from around the world use.

Christianity is not, however, the only major religion to focus on ritual. Participants of Islam, if possible make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives and must pray five times (beginning before sunrise, and ending after the sun sets) every day at specific times in the direction of Mecca, which is located in Saudi Arabia. In Judaism, rituals include lighting the menorah, celebrating Hanukkah, abstaining from the consumption of pork and shellfish, and eating only unleavened bread during Passover. Hinduism involves regularly attending temples to burn incense and offerings including bread and flowers to each God and Goddess's alter. Every belief system, whether it has one hundred followers or one hundred million, uses rituals to symbolize important aspects of their faith.

Definition of Ritual

A ritual "is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and performed according to set sequence." Rituals may be prescribed by the traditions of a community, including a religious community. Rituals are characterized by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance.

Rituals are a feature of all known human societies. They include not only the worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and cults, but also rites of passage, atonement and purification rites, oaths of allegiance, dedication ceremonies, coronations and presidential inaugurations, marriages and funerals, school

"rush" traditions and graduations, club meetings, sporting events, Halloween parties, veterans parades, Christmas shopping and more. Many activities that are ostensibly performed for concrete purposes, such as jury trials, execution of criminals, and scientific symposia, are loaded with purely symbolic actions prescribed by regulations or tradition, and thus partly ritualistic in nature. Even common actions like hand-shaking and saying hello may be termed rituals.

The field of ritual studies has seen a number of conflicting definitions of the term. One given by Kyriakidis is that a ritual is an outsider's or "etic" category for a set activity (or set of actions) that, to the outsider, seems irrational, non-contiguous, or illogical. The term can be used also by the insider or "emic" performer as an acknowledgement that this activity can be seen as such by the uninitiated onlooker.

In psychology, the term ritual is sometimes used in a technical sense for a repetitive behavior systematically used by a person to neutralize or prevent anxiety; it is a symptom of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Characteristics of Ritual

There are hardly any limits to the kind of actions that may be incorporated into a ritual. The rites of past and present societies have typically involved special gestures and words, recitation of fixed texts, performance of special music, songs or dances, processions, manipulation of certain objects, use of special dresses, consumption of special food, drink, or drugs, and much more.

Catherine Bell argues that rituals can be characterized by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performance. In religion, a ritual can comprise the prescribed outward forms of performing the *cultus*, or cult, of a particular observation within a religion or religious denomination. Although ritual is often used in context with worship performed in a church, the actual relationship between any religion's doctrine and its ritual(s) can vary considerably from organized religion to non-institutionalized spirituality. Rituals often have a close connection with reverence, thus a ritual in many cases expresses reverence for a deity or idealized state of humanity.

Anthropologists and linguists have long been interested in ritual and ceremony for what they reveal about the religious, political, social, and aesthetic aspects of societies and cultures. As a symbolic and or per formative action, rituals can be explored not only for their meanings but also for the effects they have on the lives of their participants.

Even so the definition of a ritual is not quite clear; it is one of the themes in the area of religion and culture that affects most of us. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise

purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through pre-decided signs and words and a mutual understanding of the participants about the rituals meaning.

This text contains an intelligible description of a religious ritual. Rituals have by no means always a religious context, as can be observed in sport rituals. Ritual practice and their effect on social communities (especially the churches have been analyzed in this study about *rituals* and beliefs. Rituals and ceremonies are social events which are believed to have the power to effect meaningful transformations (e.g. healing rituals). Recently sociologists have broadened the notion of ritual to include the patterned interactions of everyday life, such as etiquette and ordinary daily performances. The religious life of many Hindus is focused on devotion to God or several gods. The devotion usually takes the form of rituals and practices associated with sculptures and images of gods in home shrines.

Types of Ritual

Because of the complexities inherent in any discussion of ritual, it is often useful to make distinctions by means of typology. Although typologies do not explain anything, they do help to identify rituals that resemble each other within and across cultures.

Imitative Rituals

All rituals are dependent upon some belief system for their complete meaning. A great many rituals are patterned after myths. Such rituals can be typed as imitative rituals in that the ritual repeats the myth or an aspect of the myth. Some of the best examples of this type of ritual include rituals of the New Year, which very often repeat the story of creation. In a passage from an Indian *Brāhmaṇa* (a Hindu scripture) the answer to the question of why the ritual is performed is that the gods did it this way "in the beginning." Rituals of this imitative type can be seen as a repetition of the creative act of the gods, a return to the beginning.

Sacrificial Rituals

Another type of ritual is classified as sacrificial. Its importance can be seen in the assessment of sacrificial ritual as the earliest or elementary form of religion. The significance of sacrifice in the history of religions is well documented. A sacrifice can be animal or vegetable. In the sattvik way of worship, no blood sacrifices may be offered. Durga Puja used to have human sacrifice, but since the kings were converted to the devotional Vaishnava movement in the sixteenth century, there has been so such sacrifice. According to older people, the custom of animal sacrifices was not easily abandoned; people used to offer blood to the goddess secretly, against the express orders of the king. Later the blood sacrifices came back in a major way in the

observance of Kalipujas. But even today there is no animal sacrifice to the goddess Durga anywhere in Vishnupur, Bengal. Nor are non-vegetarian and 'hot' foods – meat, fish, eggs, onions, garlic and certain kinds of pulses- offered to the goddess.

Life-crisis Rituals

Any typology of rituals would not be complete without including a number of very important rites that can be found in practically all religious traditions and mark the passage from one domain, stage of life, or vocation into another. The basic characteristic of the life-crisis ritual is the transition from one mode of life to another. Rites of passage have often been described as rituals that mark a crisis in individual or communal life. These rituals often define the life of an individual. They include rituals of birth, puberty (entrance into the full social life of a community), marriage, conception, and death. Many of these rituals mark a separation from an old situation or mode of life, a transition rite celebrating the new situation, and a ritual of incorporation. Rituals of passage do not always manifest these three divisions; many such rites stress only one or two of these characteristics.

Rituals are natural to human beings and play an essential role in building personal and cultural identity. Ordinary family rituals are often given added meaning by overlaying them with forms of religious ritual, so placing the large and small events of life within a cosmic framework. Rituals give shape to emotions and helps humans come to terms with the major events of life. Religious ritual has generally been seen as indispensable in deepening spiritual insight. The repetition of rituals instills religious values and attitudes in the lives of the worshippers. A ritual also expresses and emphasizes the things that bind a faith community together, and through ritual both individuals and communities make visible their most basic religious needs, values and aspirations. In all religions the major events marking the cycle of life are given prominence and marked through ritual: birth, growth to adulthood, marriage and death. Seasons of the year are also marked through harvest thanksgiving, the blessing of the fleet, or rituals related to winter and summer solstice. Other events not connected to the natural cycle, but observed through annual rituals connected with religious beliefs; include the Christian observation of the life of Christ, the Islamic observance of Ramadan and Tarawih, and the Jewish Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur - amongst many others. The 20th century liturgical movement within the Christian churches saw a renewal of ritual through revised patterns of worship. The Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council promoted important changes including use of languages other than Latin for services, and the designing of new churches giving a greater focus on communal worship. Similarly other churches and religions have attempted to respond to changes in language and thought. Music has been central to ritual and worship since primitive times. Music reflects

moods, can sustain and evoke emotion and ecstasy, and is primarily a corporate action. In India sound it is traditionally the sacred source of appearance, so that music articulates order to the cosmos. The Chinese *Book of Odes* is one of the classical Confucian texts, and in Japan music was connected with early shamanistic ritual. Jewish music is clearly descended from the biblical references to the rituals of the Temple and King David. From its inception Christianity has used music in worship, and in early times the majority of the service of worship was sung or chanted. In Islam music is intrinsic to the ritual chanting of the Qur'an and to the call to prayer. The national observance of Anzac Day services has been a deeply religious ceremony since first observed in 1916. For many ordinary people, religious ritual occurs also in the decoration of graves of loved ones on Mother's Day, and increasingly is seen also in the messages and flowers placed at the sites of road fatalities. Not all religious ritual occurs in churches or in organized religious ceremonies, reflecting typically Australian views about the privacy of religious beliefs.

Instances of Ritual

Ancestor worship

Ancestor worship is basically defined as a religious or spiritual practice which revolves around the belief that the deceased continue to have a presence after they die and contribute to the spiritual quality of their living relatives. Most religions have some form of ancestor worship, and consider the connection they have to their ancestors a significant component of their belief systems. This type of worship can often be confused with the worshiping of gods and deities, but it is an entirely separate practice. Many cultures see ancestor worship as non-religious; something that simply strengthens bonds with family and offers the proper respect for deceased loved ones. Others base a person's social status on who their ancestors were and how high on the social hierarchy they were in life. Ancestor worship is mainly performed so that, by placating one's ancestors, they may be taken care of in life and death. In return for the blessing by ancestors, worship insures that the ancestor's spirits may be at peace. Other rituals that can sometimes accompany this type of worship include: sacrifice, elaborate burial ceremonies and the preparation of specific food dishes.

Pilgrimage

A pilgrimage is a journey on behalf of ritual and religious belief. One who goes on a pilgrimage is called a 'pilgrim.' Often pilgrims try to obtain salvation of their soul through this physical journey. Most times the journey is to a shrine or a sacred place of importance to a person's faith. Relevant to so many different cultural contexts, there is no single definition to describe to the act of pilgrimage. However, similarities are noticeable. Pilgrimage usually requires separation from the common everyday world

and in displaying that separation pilgrim may mark their new identity by wearing special clothes or abstaining from familiar comforts. Frequently, pilgrimages link sacred place with sacred time (i.e. the hajj always occurs on the 8th, 9th, and 10th days of the last month of the Muslim year).

Hajj

The hajj is the fifth pillar of faith. It occurs on the 8th to 12th day of Dhul-Hijah, which is the 12th month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Members of the Islamic faith are encouraged to perform the hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in their lifetime. Once a person has successfully completed the pilgrimage to Mecca he/she will receive the status of hajji.

Conclusion

Ritual behavior is obviously a means of nonverbal communication and meaning. This aspect of ritual is often overlooked in the stress on the relation of ritual to myth. Thus, the meaning of ritual is often looked for in the verbal, spoken, or belief system that is taken as its semantic correlate. The spoken elements in a ritual setting do often reveal the meaning of a ritual by reference to a belief system or mythology, but not always. Such a connection has led to an overemphasis on the importance of the belief system or myth over ritual. To assert that myths disclose more than ritual ever can is an oversimplification of the complex correlation of these two important aspects of religion. A partial explanation of this emphasis is undoubtedly the fact that a vast amount of data, both primary and secondary, is literary in form. Theories about ritual are either deduced from the primary literature of a religious tradition or are translated into written language as a result of observation.

Rituals can be studied as nonverbal communication disclosing its own structure and semantics. Scholars have only recently turned to a systematic analysis of this important aspect of human behavior; and progress in kinesics, the study of nonverbal communication, may provide new approaches to the analysis of ritual. This development may well parallel the progress in linguistics and the analysis of myth as an aspect of language.

A complete analysis of rituals would also include its relation to art, architecture, and the specific objects used in ritual such as specific forms of ritual dress. All of these components are found in ritual contexts, and all of them are nonverbal in structure and meaning.

Most rituals mark off a particular time of the day, month, year, stage in life, or commencement of a new event or vocation. This temporal characteristic of ritual is often called "sacred time." What must not be forgotten in the study of ritual is a special aspect of ritual that is often described as "sacred space." Time and place are essential features of ritual action, and both mark a specific orientation or setting for ritual. Examples of ritual time and ritual space orientation can be found in the rituals for building the sacrifice in Brahmanic Indian ritual texts; for the building of a Hindu temple or a Christian cathedral; and for consecrating those structures that symbolize a definite space-time orientation in which rituals are enacted. The shape, spatial orientation, and location of the ritual setting are essential features of the semantics of ritual action. When particular ritual objects, dances, gestures, music, and dress are included in the study of ritual; the total structure and meaning of ritual behavior far exceed any one description or explanation of ritual man. Most descriptions are selective and are dependent upon the theory and intent with which rituals are to be studied. In recent years there has been little consensus among scholars on an adequate theory, or framework, for explaining or describing ritual. Though the term has often been used to describe the determined, or fixed, behavior of both animals and men, the future study of ritual may disclose that this behavior, found throughout history and cultures, is as unique to man as his capacity for speaking a language and that change in ritual behavior is parallel to, or correlated with, change in language.



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