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Ritual: Theoretical Issues in the Study of Religion

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Abstract

This essay looks at recent theory of ritual. It argues that an overemphasis on texts in the study of religion has led to a misleading analysis of ritual as a symbolic site of meaning. On the other hand, attempts to study ritual on its own terms, primarily by attending to formal elements, suggest that the study of ritual is separable from the study of religion. At the same time, this work promises to give ritual studies a more central role in the study of religion.

Resumo

Este ensaio discute a teoria recente do ritual, afirmando que a ênfase em textos no estudo da religião tem provocado uma análise enganosa do ritual em termos dos símbolos e da significação. Por outro lado, as tentativas de estudar ritual em seus próprios termos, principalmente em termos dos elementos formais, sugerem que o estudo do ritual é destacável do estudo da religião. Ao mesmo tempo, estes trabalhos podem dar ao estudo do ritual um papel mais central nas ciências da religião.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in ritual theory, which has also become a focal point in the study of religion. As long as texts and discourse are taken as the major source or primary model for inquiring into religious traditions, the field of religious studies will be limited to such issues as representation and meaning. Consequently, scholars of religion tend to overlook the potential that recent approaches in ritual theory, and their related concepts, have for their field of research. The theoretical issues that these approaches have developed are crucial for the study of religion, so much so that one is justified in claiming that

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rituals have to be theorized on their own terms if they are to be studied seriously.² If one accepts this claim, one will need to refine one's grasp of the relation between ritual and religion and reconsider the role that the study of ritual plays in the study of religion.³ Doing so would not only place in question the assumption that meaning and representation can be taken as the major frames of reference for studying religious traditions, but would also imply the need for a radical shift of attention towards the analysis of the actual performance of ritual actions. To study rituals on their own terms would mean to study them first and foremost independently of the meanings attached to them by religious texts or discourse, uncovering how they work in and of themselves.⁴ This would obviously mean that rituals cannot be related primarily or exclusively to religion, insofar as religion is considered a system of symbols or a web (or texture) of meaning⁵—a critique that came to the fore in the mid-1970s, when common concepts of ritual were scrutinized⁶ and when first attempts for some currently prominent theoretical approaches to ritual were proposed.⁷

A point of departure for raising critical issues concerning ritual theory is Clifford Geertz's programmatic article "Religion as a Cultural System." This article established a new framework in the study of ritual and led to a paradigm shift in religious studies by attempting to take the anthropological approach in the study of ritual to be primary to the study of religious texts and discourse. Geertz introduced his approach by defining religion as a system of symbols and identifying ritual with religion. According to him, the sense of the 'really real', which is the essence of religion, originates in ritual because "the world as lived and the world as imagined, [are] fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms".⁸ For Geertz, ritual generates religion because it is capable of embodying the system of symbols and

2 See D. HANDELMAN, *Why Ritual in Its Own Right? How so?*, pp. 1-4. This issue is also addressed in C. BELL, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, p. 3.

3 See, e.g., J.S. JENSEN, *Ritual Between Art and Control*, pp. 109-110, 123-124.

4 See F. STAAL, *The Search for Meaning*, pp. 8-9, 18 and D. HANDELMAN, *Models and Mirrors*, p. xiii.

5 See C. GEERTZ, *Religion as a Cultural System*, pp. 4-8.

6 See J. GOODY, *Against "Ritual"*.

7 See, e.g., M. BLOCH, *Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation*; R.A. RAPPAPORT, *The Obvious Aspects of Ritual*; F. STAAL, *The Meaninglessness of Ritual*.

8 C. GEERTZ, *Religion as a Cultural System*, p. 5.

combining the model of and the model for reality in such a way that it "acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence."⁹

As fruitful as this approach to ritual may have been for the study of religion, it is problematic in that it presupposes a concept of symbol that misconceives the analysis of ritual performances—as long as it is grasped as a category that can only determine the type of unit that "serves as a vehicle for a conception."¹⁰ If one takes this approach seriously, one would end up analyzing the conceptions or models of reality as embodied in, or exemplified by, rituals without analyzing the rituals themselves. This concept of symbol even leads Geertz to conceive of culture as a text.¹¹ This implies that any form of ritual action can be seen as a kind of religious behavior, which is approached through the lens of a broad linguistic model. Geertz introduces such notions as the emic and etic perspectives, or the model of and model for reality, in order to refine the possibility of grasping the actor's point of view. However, despite this, he is unable to analyze rituals on their own terms, because he systematically relates the rituals back to religious conceptions that he takes to be the representation or meaning of ritual symbols. In doing so, Geertz understands ritual a mode of communicative behavior that functions to ascertain religious moods and motivations, rather than a form of human action that establishes and transforms social relations.

It is this focus on the meaning of religious symbols, and on the textual model as its representational frame of reference, that made Geertz's approach to ritual so attractive for scholars of religion. But recent approaches to ritual theory have called into question precisely this emphasis and questioned the equation of ritual with religion and language. The assumption that rituals are essentially religious, capable of transmitting meaning, or based on symbols was scrutinized in a number of ways: Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff broadened the category of ritual to include religious as well as secular rituals;¹² Maurice Bloch criticized the view that rituals can articulate or transmit meaningful propositions comparable to

9 C. GEERTZ, *Religion as a Cultural System*, p. 4.

10 C. GEERTZ, *Religion as a Cultural System*, p. 5.

11 For a critique, see V. CRAPANZANO, 'Hermes' Dilemma, p. 68-76.

12 See S.F. MOORE and B.G. MYERHOFF, *Secular Ritual*, pp. 4-5.

language;¹³ and Roy A. Rappaport suggested a definition of ritual that does not presuppose the concept of symbol as a constitutive element of the ritual form.¹⁴

This focus on formal features led to the conclusion that rituals should not be studied in relation to something other than themselves. Frits Staal argues influentially that rituals must be studied for their own sake, because they do not 'mean' anything. According to him, it is erroneously assumed that ritual "consists in symbolic activities which refer to something else", and he claims that ritual performers are only concerned with the proper execution of rules, such that: "There are no symbolic meanings going through their minds when they are engaged in performing ritual."¹⁵ Taking ritual action as completely self-absorbed and self-contained, he defines ritual as pure activity, in which the faultless execution of rules is all that matters; what the performer does matters, not what he or she thinks, believes, or says. Thus Staal contends that ritual action is performed for its own sake implying that ritual action is meaningless—"without function, aim or goal, or also that it constitutes its own goal."¹⁶ As a consequence, he maintains that rituals have to be studied for their own sake, in terms of the syntactic rules they follow.¹⁷

It was mainly this focus on ritual as a self-referential form that rendered it problematic to analyze ritual actions as meaningful propositions comparable to language. Even if one does not entirely agree with Staal's thesis,¹⁸ its main point still holds, namely, that ritual actions are essentially self-referential and should therefore be studied on their own terms. This would imply that it is inappropriate to subsume the analysis of ritual action under the study of religion and to distill the religious meaning from rituals without having analyzed the ritual actions themselves. *The study of ritual is a field of its own and not simply a continuation of the study of religion.*¹⁹

13 See M. BLOCH, Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation, p. 55.

14 See R.A. RAPPAPORT, The Obvious Aspects of Ritual, p. 179.

15 F. STAAL, The Meaninglessness of Ritual, p. 3.

16 F. STAAL, The Meaninglessness of Ritual, p. 9.

17 See F. STAAL, The Meaninglessness of Ritual, pp. 19-22.

18 For a critique see, e.g., H.H. PENNER, Language, Ritual, and Meaning, pp. 3, 10-11. For a discussion see also J. KREINATH, Semiotics.

19 See R.L. GRIMES, Ritual Studies.

Another point that has to be taken into account concerns how concepts are used, and how their use prefigures the way rituals are theorized.²⁰ If one aims at studying the internal complexity of rituals, it would be inappropriate to use theories of semantics or syntax: such theories would fail to account for the dynamic and efficacy of ritual action, even if they were able to analyze the contextual meanings or abstract forms of ritual actions. As long as generalized concepts of linguistic signs are used for analyzing ritual actions, it will be impossible to move beyond the dichotomies of form and meaning, thought and action.²¹

Charles S. Peirce's semiotic concept of index is valuable here, because it specifically addresses pragmatic dimensions of ritual action. It signifies those relations between a sign and its object in which the object ultimately determines its sign through an immediate relation.²² The index specifies the way in which signs function as vectors indicating causal relations. It allows one to build hypotheses about the intentions or capacities of agents through causal inference or the 'abduction of agency'.²³

The concept of index has the analytical potential to account for the complexity of the performance of ritual actions, and to focus on what ritual performers are actually doing with, in, and through their respective actions. This concept allows one to theorize the pragmatics of ritual action, and to avoid introducing problems into the study of ritual that are extrinsic to them, such as the semantics and syntax of religion and language. With the index, one can concentrate on the ritual actions as sign processes²⁴ and explore how they work continuously through their internal complexity to establish and transform configurations and constellations of social relations.²⁵

20 For a further consideration of the relation between analytical concepts and theoretical approaches, see J. KREINATH, *Meta-Theoretical Parameters for the Analysis and Comparison of Two Recent Approaches to the Study of the Yasna*, pp. 101-107.

21 See C. BELL, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pp. 4-6, 19-29.

22 See C.S. PEIRCE, *Collected Papers*, vol. 2, pp. 303-308.

23 See A. GELL, *Art and Agency*, pp. 13-16.

24 See J. KREINATH, *Semiotics*.

25 See M. HOUSEMAN, *The Interactive Basis of Ritual Effectiveness in a Male Initiation Rite*, pp. 221-222 and D. HANDELMAN, *Re-Framing Ritual*, pp. 14-18.

Moreover, the concept of the index also allows one to account for the pragmatics of ritual theory.²⁶ Given its potential for causal inference, this concept can overcome the dichotomy in ritual theory between thought and action, because it opens up a new framework for critical inquiry, e.g., the action of theorizing about rituals.²⁷ By raising such questions, one can scrutinize the view that ritual theories are static entities that are based on the referential semantic or logical syntax of timeless propositions. Moreover, through its vectorality the concept of the index enables one to grasp theoretical approaches in terms of their internal dynamic, to determine the theoreticians as agents of their theoretical practice, and to situate their theoretical approaches to ritual within the particular contexts of scholarly discourse.²⁸ As a result, the index can do more than merely establish new frames of reference for theorizing rituals, thus broadening the study of ritual: it can also make it clear that ritual theories are forms discursive practice that shape and configure their own field of research, due to the complexity that emerges from their approach to their own subject matter.²⁹

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26 See C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pp. 13-66.

27 For further consideration see the Introductory Essay to J. KREINATH, J. SNOEK, and M. STAUSBERG, *Theorizing Rituals*. Reference should also be made to the lecture given by Ronald L. Grimes at last year's AAR meeting (Philadelphia, PA) concerning the question "What Kind of an Act is Theorizing about Ritual?"

28 See also J. KREINATH, *Meta-Theoretical Parameters for the Analysis and Comparison of Two Recent Approaches to the Study of the Yasna*, pp. 111-113.

29 See J. KREINATH, *Semiose des Rituals*, pp. 191-201.

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