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Ritualistics

An Overview of Research from a Religio- psychological Perspective

Introduction

The study of rites or ritual has a long history. As far back as we can go in the history of religious studies we find analyses of the behavioural dimension of religiosity. It was only towards the end of the 19th century, however, that scholars began to pay more regular attention to rites. This new attitude was linked with an increased tendency to study foreign cultures, often within a discipline that had come to be called anthropology. In theology, and also very much within religious studies in general, greater notice has been given to the cognitive side, that is to say the study of myths and religio-philosophical questions. Gradually, the behavioural dimension – and therefore rites – have acquired greater significance in religious studies, something which the following presentation will demonstrate.

When writing about rituals, I like to refer to what Talal Asad found studying the different issues of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In the first edition from 1771 there were short articles on both rite and ritual. In the last edition from 1910 there was no article at all about rite, but instead a fairly extensive one on ritual. What we can see is a change in the understanding of ritual. Now ritual was looked upon as something very essential in religions all over the world. Ritual was no longer connected to liturgy and prescriptions, but to behaviour in general. Ritual even became a general concept, not exclusively connected with religion. (Asad 1993: 56–62; Popp-Baier 2002: 154–56.)

I understand the term rite as practically synonymous with behaviour. To give rite a more precise definition, I would like to suggest that a rite is generally a formal practice or custom, which can be exercised by individuals or groups. Ritual, in addition, is more formalized in character and may be defined as conscious repetitious symbolic bodily actions, often placed in contexts which are connected with the holiness dimension. In practice, the use of these two terms – rite and ritual – largely coincides.

In the following presentation I shall first give a brief account of research into rites, before turning to my own more psychologically oriented considerations on the efficacy of rites or ritual.

Older research traditions

As I have already mentioned, at the end of the 19th century there was an increasing awareness within anthropology and religious studies of the importance of rites. Rites were regarded as magic, and often irrational, activities among indigenous peoples in various parts of the world, in contrast to the technological and rational activities of more highly developed Western man. This was the age of colonialism and evolutionism, when there was a readiness among scholars to situate human behaviour within evolutionary schemes. A distinction was made between religion and magic, something which emerges clearly in the work of James George Frazer (1963). Much brainwork has subsequently been devoted to whether – and if so how – a distinction between magic and religion should be made. Today it is widely understood that such debate is obsolete and unrewarding.

Within biblical scholarship and the whole field of Middle Eastern studies, the myth and ritual school came to play an important role. It stressed the close connection between myth and rite. It claimed that a rite was always accompanied by a myth, i.e. words read or spoken that gave content and meaning to a rite. It was common to refer to enthronement myths and ritual in ancient Mesopotamia. It was also believed possible to interpolate texts from one quarter with corresponding texts from somewhere else, since there were often only fragmentary sources to begin with. In the same way, it was possible to “reconstruct” rites which were only indirectly suggested in the sources. Much of the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament was thus thought to belong to an enthronement rite, or an annual rite where the king was stripped of his dignity, assumed his people’s sins and underwent purification rites before being reinstated in his high function. This interpretive model played an important role well into the twentieth century. (Cf. Widengren 1971.)

The so-called phenomenological school, inspired, amongst other figures, by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, regarded earlier religious studies (the work of Tylor and Robertson Smith, for example) as reductionist in character. Beginning from the unconditional study of religious phenomena, one was to get as close as possible to their inner meaning. This was the working method of scholars such as Rudolf Otto (1917), Gerardus van der Leeuw (1933) and Raffaele Pettazzoni (1960). The experiential world of the religious person was to be treated with utmost seriousness and not be reduced to something else in the name of scholarship. *Homo religiosus* was promoted

as an honourable term. To a certain extent, one may claim that rites came to play a subordinate role in this school. Mircea Eliade, who may be regarded as a late representative of the school, had absorbed impressions from other theorists, including C. G. Jung (1983), and attached great importance in his research to myths and symbols without, however, entirely forgetting the ritual dimension. Rites were regarded as repetitions of cosmic myths of creation, life and death. (Eliade 1958, 1968.)

Contributions to the discussion of rites came from depth psychology, too; it is, above all, Sigmund Freud who should be mentioned in this context. He developed his psychoanalytical theory, in which the unconscious and the ego's defence mechanisms play a large part. Freud regarded repeated behaviour patterns – rites – as being caused by obsessive neuroses. But he also participated in the debate on totemism at the beginning of the twentieth century and, in his book *Totem and Taboo* (1989), he constructed his theory of parricide in the primitive human horde, something leading to the deification of the murdered father and the need for repetitive patterns of worship. Rites in this context thus acquired a predominantly negative significance. Later depth psychologists have nevertheless in many ways refined Freud's original ideas on this point.

In early religious sociology, too, rites came to play a role. In his famous book, *The Elementary Form of Religious Life* (1955), Émile Durkheim made a clear distinction between the religious and the secular. He regarded religion primarily as rites aimed at social solidarity and identification. No society without religion and no religion without collective rites, he reasoned. Durkheim's contributions have assumed great significance in the subsequent sociology of religion. Religion has come to be seen as the cementing force in societies of different kinds.

Anthropology continued in the direction taken by religious sociology and developed functionalist theories. Names such as A. R. Radcliffe-Browne (1958) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1962) may be mentioned here. There was a reaction against evolutionism and an alternative emphasis on the specific meaning of each ritual in its context. The functionalist interpretation of social phenomena sees society as a unified and more or less closed system, where every part has its organic function within the whole. Rites become important in diverting aggressions, restoring balance and getting society and its different components in overall harmony with each other. Anthropologists of different persuasions have tried, above all through the study of indigenous cultures, to identify this balance within the social machinery. (Cf. Eriksen 1995: 4–9.)

The step from functionalism to structuralism is not a large one. E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1962), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958, 1964–68) and Clifford Geertz (1993) have, through more detailed study of myths and individual rituals, tried to decipher an inner meaning structure in cultural expressions.

Through a binary polarization of phenomena, they have discovered deep strata of meaning that were not immediately apparent. The functionalist and early structuralist Arnold van Gennep deserves special mention here, since his concept of *rite de passage* has achieved wide currency. Van Gennep studied life's great transitional rites and isolated three stages through which an individual was often obliged to pass: separation, transition and incorporation. By going through rituals which separate him from earlier communities, hold him at an intermediate stage – transition – and then incorporate him into a new community, the individual is transferred from one group affiliation to another. Common examples here are puberty rites and initiation rites, which insert an individual into the adult world. Other important scholars in this group include Victor Turner and Mary Douglas. The latter has become known for her categories of "grid" and "group": grid here refers to rules controlling individual relations and formal positions in society, while group is connected with the more or less involuntary class affiliation of individuals (Douglas 1970; Myerhoff *et al.* 1987).

More recent research approaches

In the decades after the second World War great changes took place in the global structure. The era of colonization finally drew to an end and anthropologists also began to direct their research towards more complex western societies. It began to be understood that rites and rituals could be found here, too. At the same time, sociologists, historians, political scientists and other researchers analysed societies and also came to use such terms as ritual. Within etology, repetitive patterns were studied in animals and birds. The use of the terms rite and ritual has therefore become very widespread, so that they have almost come to coincide with behaviour in general.

The newer scholarly approach to rites was largely derived from structuralism, but was further combined with insights from linguistics. In the same way as one can analyse speech acts and the meaning of words, one can also analyse ritual behaviours. These acquire a symbolic value which goes far beyond the immediate character of the actual expression. A scholar who has made significant contributions in this field is Edmund Leach (1967). Leach understands rites as cultural messages with significance for people's ways of understanding their position within society, as well as for how they are to position themselves with regard to the invisible or metaphysical world. In other words, rites or ritual make culture meaningful.

Clifford Geertz has significantly developed these ideas. Geertz sees religion as a cultural system of symbols adding significance to people's motivations and emotions by giving unified and coherent patterns to the meaning of life. A world view is lived out through rites and thereby acquires concrete meaning for the private individual.

A further development of these ideas can be found in such scholars as E. Thomas Lawson and R. N. McCauley (1990). The latter have become known for a so-called cognitive theory of religion. In the same way as Noam Chomsky claims that linguistic competence goes back to physiological structures in the human brain, these researchers claim that religious communicative competence is also based on physiological functions. One can in other words distinguish a kind of "grammar" of religion and particularly for rites. If one participates in a rite, one knows the rules for an exchange of views, just as the user of a language does. Lawson and McCauley are partly critical of earlier scholars who, in their opinion, devote themselves principally to descriptions and subjective judgments. The cognitive theory, they believe, is more concerned with theorizing and even with empirical testing.

Similar theoretical approaches are to be found in Dan Sperber (1996) and Pascal Boyer (2001). They stress that religion is a normal human activity based on the cognitive ability developed during the evolutionary process. Confronting the reality around herself the human being uses her *intuitive* capacity for understanding things. These are the everyday experiences we have. But there are also a lot of things which cannot be understood so easily. In this case, a capacity cognitivists call *counterintuitive* takes over and forms the ideas. Religion is basically understood as a counterintuitive activity. Boyer writes: "There is no religious instinct, no *specific* inclination in the mind, no particular disposition for these concepts, no special religion center in the brain, and religious persons are not different from nonreligious ones in essential cognitive functions. Even faith and belief seem to be simple by-products of the way concepts and inferences are doing their work for religion in much the same way as for other domains." (Boyer 2001: 329–30.)

Ritual activity is also seen as a product of the human equipment in the cognitive and behavioural domains. Rituals are extremely important in human life and are directed towards its social realm. Boyer writes: "What matters to rituals and makes them relevant is that one construes the social effects as the *result* of the actions prescribed. Because of the massive salience of agency in our mental systems, most humans fill this gap with concepts of agents; but an abstraction like 'our tradition' or 'society' can play much the same role as gods or ancestors." (See also Pyysiäinen 2001.)

Ritual studies were adopted by the American Academy of Religion as a special area of research within religious studies in 1977. They received official status in 1982 under the designation of "Ritual Studies Group" (Grimes 1987). At the same time, the *Journal of Ritual Studies* began publication, making an important contribution towards unity within the group. A driving force of the group has been Ronald L. Grimes, who also published his ground-breaking study, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (revised edition, 1995). In this work, Grimes gives a thorough account of different rituals

and relates them to such concepts as time, space and language. He divides rites into different categories and thereby comes to include a very large number of formalized human behaviours within the notion of ritual. He also reviews the work of different theorists such as Gotthard Booth (psychosomatic theory of illness), Theodor Gaster and Victor Turner (anthropological theory) and Jerzy Grotowski (ritual theatre).

Criticism against ritualistics in the sense Grimes understands it has also been expressed by Jack Goody in his article "Against 'Ritual': Loosely structured thoughts on a loosely defined topic". He is of the opinion that such a general term as Ritual Studies does not bring anything substantially new to scholarly work. One is merely comparing ideas from different perspectives, but very few new aspects are really being added (Goody 1977; Zuess 1987).

We are also given an extensive account of rites in Catherine Bell's study, *Ritual. Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997). This is a thorough survey of previous scholarship in religious studies, as well as such individual activities as rites of passage, calendar rites, communion, rites of affliction, fasts and feasts, and political rites. Bell also considers general activities with the character of rites, and therefore discusses formalism, traditionalism, invariance, sacral symbolism, performance etc. In this context, she also stresses the physicality of rites. Finally, she adopts a more sociologically oriented approach, analysing societies that promote rites and ritual, as well as those groups which try to resist ritualisation. The book is a quite excellent review of theories and material connected with the study of rites.

The study *Pluralism and Identity. Studies in ritual behaviour* (edited by Jan Platvoet and Karel van der Toorn, 1995) is also a valuable contribution to the field. Here we are given a description of real rites in different cultures (including Umbanda, Bodhgaya rites, the Ayodhya conflict, the Rechabites in ancient Israel and several Muslim rites), as well as a more theoretically oriented analysis of the concept of "ritual". It is Jan Platvoet who goes into the question of definitions, providing an exhaustive account of how he understands the issue (Platvoet 1995).

To summarise earlier research, then, we find that scholars were initially prepared to see ritual among indigenous populations where magic was a frequently occurring phenomenon. Ritual was something more irrational, which could not therefore be found among more developed groups in the west. Myth or the conceptual was more characteristic of the "evolved" individual. Gradually, however, the focus changed, largely through work in sociology and linguistics. Rites and ritual are now seen as meaningful instruments of communication for maintaining the structure of societies and the identity of individuals. Rites have become something quite universal and are found in every culture. One even speaks of secular rituals (Moore and Myerhoff 1977).

Rite and ritual have become practically the same thing as behaviour in general. At this point, we come to the corporeality of rites, referring to what today often goes under the name of "embodiment". Every rite presupposes a body and one may therefore claim that religion and identity, in a certain sense, sit in the body. We have come a long way, then, from regarding a person's religion or world view only as something conceived – or philosophical – to seeing it rather as something also anchored in the body and in behaviour.

In her article on the misuse of drugs and religious rituals Valerie DeMarinis offers a very interesting psychological perspective on the topic. She looks upon the use of drugs as a ritual process which could be changed if the therapy also included treatment of the personal meaning system, together with management at the biological and social levels. (DeMarinis 1996.)

Some reflections in the light of religious psychology

When we talk of rites and their significance for the individual and society at large, we come to the question of their "efficacy". One may ask how rites and individuals give people substance, and in what way they can exercise a kind of power over those that practise them. In partial illustration of this question, I would like to offer briefly a religio-psychological perspective for which I have become an advocate in recent years (Holm 1997a and 1997b).

It must first be noted that all individuals, while growing up, are subject to a learning process. We do not invent cultural patterns by ourselves, but we are brought up among thought processes and behaviours that are more or less collective and culture bound. In this process, we constantly meet other people who influence us by the force of their personalities, but we are also drawn into a number of different situations that can prove either emotionally attractive or repulsive. As we thus learn cultural behaviour patterns – rites or ritual – we also acquire, by actual performance, an emotional relation to our educators, as well as to the different situations in which we find ourselves. The experiences of cultural learning and influence stays in the memory with varying degrees of emotional charge. But experiences are not merely preserved in a long succession; they are adapted in the inner consciousness where fantasies, dreams and daydreams play an important part. In this way, experiences are "condensed" into larger units, perhaps the kind of thing that is positive and attractive, but also something that may be negative and repulsive. A certain amount of this material becomes fairly insignificant and disappears into what we call oblivion.

Our experiences of early contact with key persons in our environment, with behavioural patterns imposed on us while growing up, as well as

with thought processes we learn mainly through language, are combined in larger units of a symbolic nature. A picture of god can thus be understood as a symbolic quantity, where features from concrete individuals in our childhood play a part, but where ideas learned through tradition also acquire significance. It is a similar process with the negative symbol of the devil, which becomes the quintessence of everything destructive. The cognitive forms of expression associated with religion can therefore be understood as symbolic expressions of experiences undergone by previous generations and formalized in this way. The same process operates with rites: prayers, religious services, baptism, communion, marriage, funerals etc., become symbolic actions which include content from tradition, but also a great deal from the individual experiential world present in every single person from early childhood. The plane on which this takes place within each individual psyche is something I call *inner existence space*.

The experiences of earlier generations have, over the course of time, been externalised and brought out into the collective, forming patterns where norms and social customs are important components. Culture is thus a stereotyped human reality, which has acquired fixed forms in both linguistic and behavioural activity. In other words, culture contains condensed human experience in the form of a mass of symbols. This may be called *outer existence space*.

The interaction between one's own inner world and the outer social one is essential. When symbols from this inner world find a correspondence in culture, a kind of fertilization takes place which leads us forward and provides satisfaction on an inner plane. When an individual finds a correspondence between inner experience structures and what is offered by the collectively given in culture, a kind of *inner role-taking* takes place, a process which can lead to growth, healing, hope and optimism. Sometimes, however, there are negative blockages which can lead to hardships and reverses.

The conceptual model I have described above I call *integrated role theory*.

The material content acquired through the symbolic function is thus something which earlier generations have possessed and which is always passed on in cultural formations – that is to say both narratives and rites. At the same time, there is an experiential base unique to each individual. When these two formations simultaneously enrich each other, the individual is given experiential qualities with great reality value. The characters of fairy-tales can grasp such content and evoke quite fundamental experiential worlds in both children and adults. The relationship with religious symbols is similar. There is nevertheless a difference: the religious symbols are often fostered by groups who endow them with transcendental value and a self-evident existence.

Where religion is concerned, I start from the assumption that all human life is influenced by something we might call the sacrality dimension. A

sociologist like Émile Durkheim made a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. I nevertheless find it more justified to regard the sacrality dimension as a continuum from something quite commonplace and profane to something holy and sacred. Various intermediate forms are found both at the individual level and socially. Each of us undergoes significant experiences fixed in time and space, regarding them as something that goes beyond normal occurrences. It may be a matter of birthdays, examination days, places where one has experienced something very positive or very negative. And in societies there are also generally places and times where one clings in a particular way to things that have happened in history: memorial sites, burial sites, war veteran graves, independence days etc. The really sacred places and points in time are naturally churches and religious services of all kinds. By the repetition of rites in such places and at such times, one establishes for each new generation the memory of events in history – mythological and/or historical.

Religious symbols such as divine services frequently return to what for the individual are often quite commonplace and “simple” circumstances. It is a matter of different ways of approaching the symbolic and spiritual centre which forms the nucleus of faith. In most cultic contexts, this happens through reading – reciting or singing – holy texts, listening to the interpretation of texts (preaching), invocation through prayer or praise-giving, performing some kind of sacrifice (taking a collection) and participating in the ritual meal (communion for Christians). Such contexts, and many other cultic events, always include experiences from both the world of religion and from that of everyday life.

When discussing the efficacy of symbolic actions – or rites – then, it is important to consider both the learning process which has preceded the rite itself and the inner symbolic structures carried by each individual in their own inner existence space. A special rite or ritual becomes meaningful and significant for an individual when her inner experiential structures correspond to the alleged content of a certain action. If one obtains reinforcement at this point through group processes involving persons with similar inner symbolic structures, then these experiences can be very strong and sometimes even approach what we would call trance or ecstasy. In such cases, leaders of different kinds can strongly influence individuals and channel opinions far in the direction of enthusiasm and exclusivity. If the influence of these individuals is seen as inappropriate, then the experiences can be negative, leading to protests and repudiations.

The efficacy of rites and rituals is therefore in direct proportion to how the learning process surrounding them has functioned, and depends on what symbolic structures in outer existence space an individual can connect their performance with. This fluctuates somewhat from generation to generation and from culture to culture, but there are on the whole common

structures that remain relatively fixed over a long period. Rites and rituals are a fairly fixed symbolic language which people have used at all times, and which have created solidarity within groups and meaningful experiences for individuals (see also Argyle 2002).

Sometimes existential crises and geographical displacements can produce a situation where deeply ingrained rites become meaningless. Then the person in question must rebuild contact with content which corresponds meaningfully to an altered inner world and reality interpretation. In such cases, it is precisely rites themselves which can be of help in the construction of some new, so-called "wordless language".

Summary

The study of rites has been influenced relatively little by psychological perspectives. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical contribution came to emphasize the negative and compulsive character of rites. It is mainly anthropologists and various scholars of religion who have analysed the form and function of rituals in different societies. We have been able to trace a development in the history of research, from seeing rites as something magic and irrational to regarding them as meaningful and universally human phenomena. On the whole, we may claim to have found an increased appreciation of rituals in the literature. There is now a tendency to emphasize the body and the corporeal as a carrier of spiritual meaning. We have come to the conclusion that there is no spirituality without a connection to behaviour, which in turn always implies a body.

But for bodily rites to achieve efficacy, it is essential that they should be connected with learning processes and symbolic functions in an individual's inner existence space, to the kinds of symbols that have some positive charge and meaning. Without such psychic content, the performance of a rite becomes simply an empty event which in the worst case only produces negative reactions. If, on the other hand, there is positive memory material on the depth-psychological level of events and rites of different kinds, then the feeling of significance and relevance can reach the point where one experiences something definable as ecstasy or trance.

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