

11-2-1997

Preface to Ritual: Dimensions and Perspectives

Catherine M. Bell
Santa Clara University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/rel_stud



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bell, C. M. (1997). Preface. In *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford University Press.

This material was originally published in *Ritual: Dimensions and Perspectives* by Catherine Bell, and has been reproduced by permission of [Oxford University Press](#). For permission to reuse this material, please visit <http://www.oup.co.uk/academic/rights/permissions>.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.



Preface

While the activities we think of as “ritual” can be found in many periods and places, the formal study of ritual is a relatively recent and localized phenomenon. When made the subject of systematic historical and comparative cultural analysis, ritual has offered new insights into the dynamics of religion, culture, and personhood. At the same time, it has proven to be a particularly complicated phenomenon for scholars to probe—because of the variety of activities that one may consider ritual, the multiplicity of perspectives one may legitimately take in interpreting them, and the way in which defining and interpreting ritual enter into the very construction of scholarship itself.

In contrast to an earlier work, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, which addressed specific theoretical issues concerning the dichotomy of thought and action in ritual theory, this book is meant to be a more holistic and pragmatic orientation to multiple dimensions of the phenomenon of ritual.¹ It provides a fairly comprehensive depiction of the history of theories about ritual and religion (part I), the spectrum of both ritual and ritual-like activities (part II), and the fabric of social and cultural life that forms the context in which people turn to ritual practices—and even to ritual theories (part III). In continuity with the earlier book, however, this study brings a particular perspective to these discussions, namely, the position that “ritual” is not an intrinsic, universal category or feature of human behavior—not yet, anyway. It is a cultural and historical construction that has been heavily used to help differentiate various styles and degrees of religiosity, rationality, and cultural determinism. While ostensibly an attempt to identify a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon, our current concept of ritual is also, and inevitably, a rather particular way of looking at and organizing the world. The import of this particularity is one of the concerns of this book. While sections of part III extend some of the theoretical arguments raised in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, for the most part, this study is also a broad application of the methodological suggestions raised there.

To anyone interested in ritual in general, it becomes quickly evident that there is no clear and widely shared explanation of what constitutes ritual or how to understand it. There are only various theories, opinions, or customary notions, all of which reflect the time and place in which they are formulated. This complexity is portrayed in the organization of this book. Traditionally, comprehensive surveys of a topic lay out their subject in either of two ways: as a narrative telling of the “story” of the topic or as an analytic “inventory” of the topic’s subtopics. This book attempts to take a third course by presenting the fluidity and confusion, as well as the consensus and commonsense, that have shaped so much of the way we have talked about ritual. Therefore, instead of approaching ritual as a clear-cut and timeless object of scrutiny, the following chapters focus on how a variety of definitions and constructed understandings of ritual have emerged and shaped our world. As such, this presentation recognizes that any discussion of ritual is essentially an exercise in reflective historical and comparative analysis.

While each of the major sections of this book plays a role in constructing the overall argument about ritual, they also organize the issues and data autonomously in terms of three distinct frameworks. Part I, *Theories: The History of Interpretations*, presents a roughly chronological ordering of the most influential approaches to defining and explaining ritual behavior. It begins with theories concerning the origins of religion and then depicts the emergence of various schools that have developed distinctive perspectives for analyzing ritual. While far from exhaustive, this account tries to highlight the significance of ritual to most of the important understandings of religion and culture. This account also suggests that the history of theories contains only limited instances of any progressive development and refinement of the idea of ritual. To a great extent, multiple and even mutually exclusive perspectives on ritual continue to coexist due to fundamental indeterminacies that attend the identification of ritual, on the one hand, and historical changes in the projects of scholarly analysis, on the other. Nonetheless, to provide as much clarity as possible, there are three special sections that present extended “profiles” of specific rituals that have been much studied by the preceding theoretical schools. These profiles give readers the opportunity to compare and contrast how different theoretical approaches have actually interpreted particular rites.

Part II, *Rites: The Spectrum of Ritual Activities*, opens by exploring those activities that most people consider to be good examples of ritual: birth and death ceremonies, healing and exchange rites, sacrifices and enthronements, and so on. In each case, the analysis attempts to uncover the particular logic and symbolic structures of these familiar genres of ritual practice. However, by shifting attention to various activities that are not ritual but are readily thought to have “ritual-like” qualities—such as etiquette, meditation, and certain sports or theatrical performances—it is possible to uncover some of the fundamental ways of acting that are intrinsic to ritualizing in European and American culture. These examples suggest that larger questions concerning the nature of ritual action may be very dependent upon the context in which certain qualities of action are elaborated or muted.

Part III, *Contexts: The Fabric of Ritual Life*, explores the broader relationships between ritual activities and social life, specifically addressing why some groups have more ritual than others, how rituals change, and the place of ritual in so-called

traditional and modern settings. The vitality of much traditional ritual, experiments in new forms of ritualization, the influence of anthropological writings, and the development of a new paradigm for self-conscious ritualization—all indicate the variety of factors that influence both how we *view* ritual and how we *do* it. In this section, the instabilities of theory and data uncovered in parts I and II are recast in the context of the very emergence of “ritual” as a category for depicting a putatively universal phenomenon. Critiques of the function and operation of such universal categories necessitate a more systematic awareness of the way in which concepts like “ritual” construct a position of generally scholarly and objective analysis in contrast to the activities identified as data and as irredeemably locked within their cultural particularity.

These three frameworks contribute a number of perspectives to an overall analysis of the phenomenon of ritual. Let me highlight this analysis as succinctly as possible. Today we think of “ritual” as a complex sociocultural medium variously constructed of tradition, exigency, and self-expression; it is understood to play a wide variety of roles and to communicate a rich density of overdetermined messages and attitudes. For the most part, ritual is the medium chosen to invoke those ordered relationships that are thought to obtain between human beings in the here-and-now and non-immediate sources of power, authority, and value. Definitions of these relationships in terms of ritual’s vocabulary of gesture and word, in contrast to theological speculation or doctrinal formulation, suggest that the fundamental efficacy of ritual activity lies in its ability to have people embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of things.

Despite the consensus surrounding this perspective on ritual, the emergence of the concept of “ritual” as a category for human action is not the result of any single or necessary progress in human development. Nor can the concept imply that all so-called ritual practices can be reduced to a uniform, archetypal, or universal set of acts, attitudes, structures, or functions. The definition, incidence, and significance of so-called ritual practices are matters of particular social situations and organizations of cultural knowledge. These have varied greatly even in European and American history. Critics of what we call ritual are found among the Old Testament prophets, Greek philosophers, Protestant reformers, and many secular participants in the current scene. Promoters of what we mean by ritual are just as varied. While 17th-century Quakers espoused a particularly radical antiritualism, the late-20th-century African-American writer and founder of the festival of Kwanzaa, Maulana Karenga, sees ritual as a primary means for self-transformation and cultural revolution.²

Ultimately, this book will argue that talk about ritual may reveal more about the speakers than about the bespoken. In this vein, analysis of the emergence of the concept of ritual and its various applications make clear the way in which the concept has mediated a series of relationships between “us” and some “other”—be they papist idolators, primitive magicians, or the ancient wise ones who have resisted the forces of modernity. The concluding arguments of part III attempt to demonstrate how the emergence and subsequent understandings of the category of ritual have been fundamental to the modernist enterprise of establishing objective, universal knowledge that, as the flip side of its explanative power, nostalgically rues the loss of enchantment. Overall, the organization of the book attempts to introduce the general but

serious reader to the basics as well as the complexities of this area of discussion about religion. As part of that project, it includes familiar figures and ideas, and some of both that are not so familiar. I hope that the mix will stimulate fresh inquiry on the practices of religion.

The ancient Chinese sage Xunzi (pronounced Shyun'-dz), quoted in the epigraph, offers three pieces of practical advice for anyone attempting to talk about ritual.³ In effect, he warns against the temptation to reduce this complex phenomenon to simplistic formulas or strict categories. He also suggests that elaborate theories constructed by means of labyrinthine methodological considerations will only lead one away from reality. Finally, he reminds us that we will never understand ritual if we are apt to look down on what other people do and view their actions from a position of intellectual or observational superiority. While recognizing the self-serving significance of this argument for a major proponent of Confucian teachings, this is still valuable advice that I have tried to take very seriously.

For historical clarity in part I and two chapters in part III, the dates for major theorists are provided in the first substantive discussion of their work but not for those born about 1940 or later. In general, foreign terms follow the spelling adopted in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), except for Chinese terms, which are given in the Pinyin system of Romanization. Various material in part III was previously published in *Studia Liturgica* (vol. 23, no. 1 [1993]) and *The Proceedings of the American Benedictine Academy* (Summer 1994), presented at Harvard University Divinity School in November 1995, and forthcoming in *Critical Terms in the Study of Religion*, edited by Mark C. Taylor (University of Chicago).

I want to acknowledge my debt to several diligent assistants: Victoria Waters, who helped edit the manuscript after Teresa Maria Romero and Jada Pogue assisted me in the research. I am also grateful for the assistance of colleagues who read sections of the manuscript, notably Frederick Denny, William Doty, Edmund Gilday, and Ninian Smart. I bear full responsibility, of course, for any errors of fact or interpretation. As usual, the most demanding critic and unflagging supporter has been my husband, Steven M. Gelber.

Santa Clara
1997

C.B.