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# Performance

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S cholars use many terms to talk about religious activity, most basically, liturgy, worship, ritual, and recently performance. Although these terms reflect different perspectives and assumptions, they share the supposition that ceremonial actions characterized by a self-conscious formality and traditionalism are a primary aspect of religion and an important focus in any project to understand religion. Nonetheless, most theories of religion since the Enlightenment have tended to emphasize the more cognitive aspects of religion no matter how rooted these were thought to be in emotional, doctrinal, or communal experience. In the last several decades, however, religious studies has become (as have other fields such as anthropology, history, and psychology) increasingly concerned to give more attention to the actual "doing" of religion. In this venture, the term "ritual," which pioneered the attempt to get beyond confessional perspectives by suggesting a nearly universal structure to religious activities, has attracted some criticism. Major critiques note its long-standing complicity in bifurcating thought and action, its unilateral imposition of symbolic intentionality, and the "globalization" by which nearly everything becomes some sort of ritual (Bell 1992; Asad 1993; Goody 1977).

The term "performance" attempts to minimize these problems and explore religious activity more fully in terms of the qualities of human action. Interest in the language of performance has been multifaceted, explicitly experimental, and occasionally quite idiosyncratic. While there are some islands of consensus, there is little systematic direction or assessment. Indeed, an exclusive emphasis on performance has receded in favor of a broader set of terms used alongside performance, notably "ritualization" and "ritual practice." Yet by virtue of a shared concern to deal with action as action, all of these theoretical orientations can be loosely grouped as "performance approaches" to the study of religion. Moreover, despite their heterogeneity, they have been sufficiently coherent and dynamic to influence fundamental orientations in the study of religion today.

The terminology of performance harbors some basic ambiguity. The oldest meanings of the noun denote the accomplishment or execution of a specified action, most notably a command or a promise. Similarly, performance has also come to mean the enactment of a script or score, as in a theatrical play or musical recital. More recent uses, however, emphasize a type of event in which the very activity of the agent or artist is the most critical dimension and not the completion of the action. With this repertoire of meanings, religious studies uses the language of performance to stress the execution of a preexisting script for activity (as in conducting a traditional church service) or the explicitly unscripted dimen-

sions of an activity in process (as in the spirit or quality of the service). While the former sense of enacting a script captures much of how ritual activity has been traditionally viewed, the latter sense of focusing on the qualities of ritual action is the concern of current approaches. Overall, usage remains diverse and ambiguous: To speak of ritual performances or the performance of worship can imply a tradition-oriented execution of established codes of behavior, an action-oriented perspective focused on the doing itself, or both.

The notion of performance became popular in the late 1960s. At that time several well-known sociologists and anthropologists began to embrace such terminology as a means of sidestepping the mind/body and thought/action dichotomies that previous approaches to ritual appeared to impose. Among the most influential formulations were Victor Turner's ethnographic descriptions of ritual as a processual form of "social drama," J. L. Austin's linguistic theory of "performative utterances," and Erving Goffman's analyses of the scenarios of "social interaction." This general direction found further amplification in the work of Stanley Tambiah and Clifford Geertz. Tambiah explicitly focused on performance as a way to rectify the devaluation of action that occurs when it is contrasted with thought, while Geertz argued for the necessity of "blurred genres" of interpretation in order to do justice to the ways in which a ritual may be like a game, a drama, or an "ensemble of texts" (Geertz 1983; 1973, 452). In this vein, Richard Schechner's writings on anthropology and theater offered provocative connections among ritual, experiments in performance art, and cross-cultural dimensions of expressive physical movement (1977, 1993). Before long, there were enthusiastic suggestions that the notion of performance was a conceptual and methodological "breakthrough," possibly able to reintegrate the bifurcated disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences (e.g., Hymes 1975, 11).

While reflecting some of the ambiguities in the term itself, these new methods employed the language of performance to try to decode action as action by going beyond the textual framework standard to decoding analysis. That is, the challenge was to grasp the logic of the provisional, instinctive, and performative in social action without translating it into something else in the very act of analyzing it. Many prominent "practice" theorists like Marshall Sahlins, Sherry B. Ortner, and Pierre Bourdieu shared this concern, although they did not emphasize performance terminology per se. Their formulations of the dynamics intrinsic to how people do things in culturally effective ways have delineated a surer focus on the expedient and negotiated dimensions of human activity or, in other words, the play of power in the micropolitics of all social action. In this context, power refers less to physical control of people than to social prestige or the concern to secure the dominance of models of reality that render one's world coherent and viable.

In the field of religious studies in particular, the language of performance is usually invoked to counter the scholarly tendency to approach religious activity

as if it were either a type of scriptural text to be analyzed or the mere physical execution of a preexisting ideology. Although Paul Ricoeur proposed the text metaphor for the analysis of meaningful action as late as 1971, the concern in religious studies soon paralleled that of other fields, namely, how to get beyond textual metaphors for action and the particular practices of decoding that such a metaphor implies. The goal has been an analytic orientation truer to the nature of human activity, or at least one less patently reflective of the hermeneutical stance and agenda of the textual scholar. Hence, the interdisciplinary developments noted above influenced religious studies as much as any other field. However, religious studies also registered another sort of influence with the major upheavals in liturgical traditions that began to occur in the late 1960s and 1970s. Liturgical experiments in more open-ended forms of communal performance underscored dimensions of ritual activity that had been relatively inaccessible to those looking at religious action as the execution of a "script" of doctrines, beliefs, and traditions. Particularly hidden from that older view were the dynamics of ritual change; despite the condemnation of some experts, projects to redesign familiar ritual conventions were radically shifting the formal religious experiences of most Americans. The terminology of performance not only appeared better able to appreciate these shifts in contemporary religious practice but also seemed to provide fresh justification for them (Bell 1997).

Influenced by these developments, work on performance in religious studies has been quite varied. For example, there are the more theologically oriented studies of Thomas F. Driver (1991) and Theodore Jennings (1982), with their respective pastoral and philosophical emphases. In the history of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith's rereading of traditional texts demonstrates the importance of the exact historical-political context of the ritual over phenomenological form, a conclusion also borne out by the more anthropological studies of Bruce Lincoln (Smith 1982, 53–65, 90–101; Lincoln 1989, 53–74). In a very different key, the work of René Girard (1977) on ritual scapegoating or Walter Burkert (1996) on the biological roots of sacrifice weave psychology, folklore, literature, and sociobiology into grand syntheses about religion and civilization that are reminiscent of Sigmund Freud or the Cambridge myth-and-ritual school.

With the publication of *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* in 1982, Ronald L. Grimes attempted to lay the groundwork for ritual studies as a field in itself, albeit an overtly interdisciplinary one. The *Journal of Ritual Studies,* founded a few years later, particularly encouraged multidisciplinary approaches to ritual performances, setting aesthetic and biological analyses alongside cultural, political, and liturgical ones. Although interdisciplinary approaches have increasingly become the rule since the early 1980s, it is not clear to what extent new topics like performance have led the way or emerged as a result, but it has probably been a bit of both. In any case, this embracing of methodological diversity brought new groups into a wide-ranging conversation. For example, liturgical studies became closely involved in the theoretical developments described above

and began to articulate ritual as a primary medium for communal renewal that had major implications for theology, scriptural studies, and liturgy (Collins 1981; Collins and Powers 1983; Kelleher 1993). Indeed, one could argue that the influence of performance terminology in religious studies has come full circle from seeing action as a type of text to seeing the text as a type of activity. At times the enthusiasm for bringing a performance approach to bear on various aspects of religion has appeared to push sober discretion aside. Recently, some para-linguistic models of ritual action that focus in various ways on the prior cognitive competence of the agent who produces an act have emerged in opposition to some forms of performance theory (Staal 1989; Lawson and McCauley 1990).

The most significant contributions of performance theory involve a cluster of interrelated themes that embody important dimensions of recent thinking about religion and culture. In fact, the rubric of performance has been indispensable to the articulation of the specifically cultural dynamics involved in religious activity, thereby recognizing religious life as more than a functional expression of conceptual beliefs or social relationships. This focus on cultural dynamics fueled speculation about just what these activities actually signify or mean. Questions of meaning led, in turn, to concerns with how performative actions produce a culturally meaningful environment as opposed to simply communicating ideas or attitudes. The anthropologist Milton Singer, for example, described a number of Hindu ritual festivals as "cultural performances" that do not express social relations so much as the more hidden structures of the Hindu cultural system (1972, 64–7). Turner (1969) went further in arguing that Ndembu rituals not only give dramatic form to underlying social tensions in such a system, they orchestrate a resolution of these tensions. Both Singer and Turner represented a shift from seeing ritual performances as projections of an existing system of social relations to seeing them as modes of expressing cultural ideas and dispositions. They also pointed the way to a further perspectival shift that would view such cultural expressions as the very activity by which culture is constantly constructed and reproduced. No longer would religious ritual be understood simply as a means of transmitting ideas or molding attitudes, either by explicit socialization or implicit coding. Performance approaches seek to explore how activities *create* culture, authority, transcendence, and whatever forms of holistic ordering are required for people to act in meaningful and effective ways. Hence, by virtue of this underlying concern, performance terminology analyzes both religious and secular rituals as orchestrated events that construct people's perceptions and interpretations.

By logical extension, performance theorists are also concerned with the peculiar efficacy that distinguishes ritual activities from related activities such as literal communication, routine labor, or pure entertainment. There is less consensus in this area, however, than in some others. Schechner and Appel suggest that ritual performance achieves a distinctive type of psychological transformation, sometimes described as an intensity of "flow" or "concentration" (1989, 4). Others

argue that the efficacy of ritual performance resides in the reorchestration of the meanings of symbols, which is accomplished by the nondiscursive, dramaturgical, and rhetorical dynamics of the performance (Schieffelin 1985, 707–10). Geertz compares these dynamics to the transformative abilities of dramatic theater, where the impact is "neither a persuasion of the intellect nor a beguiling of the senses. . . . It is the enveloping movement of the whole drama on the soul of man. We surrender and are changed" (Geertz 1983, 28, citing Charles Morgan). Another argument links the efficacy of ritual to what is called its emergent qualities, that is, its ability to bring about social and ontological change by virtue of the doing itself: a child is now recognized as an adult, prestige has accrued to some but not others, certain social relationships or alliances have been strengthened while others are undermined (Bauman 1975, 302–5). However embryonic, these attempts to explore the peculiar efficacy of performance illustrate a major goal of performance theory: to show that ritual action does what it does by virtue of its dynamic, diachronic, physical, and sensual characteristics.

Intrinsic to these concerns with the dynamics of performance is a fresh awareness of human agents as active creators of both cultural continuity and change rather than passive inheritors of a system who are conditioned from birth to replicate it. This emphasis is often a self-conscious development of Marx's insight that people make their own history, even if they do not make it exactly as they please (1948, 15). From this perspective, change is a dynamic process integral to how persons live and reproduce culture and not the disruption of some intrinsically static state of affairs. In other words, performance theory is more likely to eschew concerns with how ritual molds people to maintain the status quo, looking instead at how individuals fashion rituals that shape their world, with some theorists describing a complex interaction of these forces (Handelman 1990). This emphasis on both the impetus of individual agency as well as its constraints has led to a new sociological engagement of power, politics, negotiation, and appropriation. The work of Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault is frequently invoked to elaborate this view of agency.

Performance imagery also employs an analytic vocabulary that attempts to go beyond primarily intellectual assessments of what ritual does for a better appreciation of the emotional, aesthetic, physical, and sensory aspects of religion. This means special attention to the bodily (broadly defined) dimensions of ritual activity. Some theorists appeal to *kinesthesia*, the sensations experienced by the body in movement, or *synesthesia*, the evocation of an integrated and overwhelming sensory experience (Schechner 1977, 99–107; Sullivan 1986, 6–8). Others see this physical dimension as the site for many more "senses" than the usual five, such as beauty, duty, direction, balance, and common sense (Bourdieu 1977, 124). With a more taxonomic perspective, Grimes catalogs a spectrum of physical styles and cognitive sensibilities invoked in ritual activities (1985, 1–7; 1995, 24–57).

Performance approaches are also involved in reconsiderations of the cultural

ramifications of orality and literacy. The rubric of performance appears to facilitate greater anthropological attention to literate cultures, while supporting more attention to oral practices by the traditionally text-based scholars of religious studies. For example, recent studies identify the importance of performative dimensions found in various scriptural and textual traditions (Krondorfer 1992; Graham 1987; Blackburn 1988; Lutgendorf 1991). Wilfred Cantwell Smith's rather simple contrast of the literate/textual and oral/performative media—"what theology is to the Christian Church, a ritual dance may be to an African tribe"—has given way to an awareness of a more complex interaction of oral and literate forms (1979, 15). Some ethnographic analyses specifically explore ritual performances as the source of key religious concepts for nonelite social classes, as in Chinese notions of spirit and ghost, in contrast to which elite classes would tend to create and use more literary formulations (Weller 1987, 86). Other arguments demonstrate the impossibility of making any simple distinctions between oral and literate societies or media, pointing to multiple and complex dynamics among degrees of literacy, types of texts, and forms of textual authority (e.g., Gill 1985). Certainly performance theories appear to encourage scholars of religion to pay more attention to those practices that have no scriptural basis, such as domestic practices and local religion in both routine and anomalous examples (Orsi 1985; Christian 1992).

Finally, a greater awareness of the scholar's own position is intrinsic to the performance approach, articulating postmodernist concerns for reflexivity, critiquing claims to simple objectivity, and sometimes systematically deconstructing the whole scholarly stance. In describing the ritual construction of new cultural images, dispositions, or situations, various performance analyses have also focused attention on concomitant processes of indigenous self-reflection and self-interpretation. As a distinctive quality of performance, wherein people become an audience to themselves, reflexivity has invited further speculation on the comparable role of the theorist observing and studying ritual (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The provocative claim that the epistemological concerns of those who *study* ritual parallel the epistemological concerns of those who *perform* ritual, giving theorists and performers much in common, is an interesting focus of some debate (Jennings 1982; Bell 1992, 29). Turner, for his part, saw the dramatic dimension of social action as affording both personal and public forms of reflexivity, a type of "mirroring" that enables the community to stand back and reflect upon their actions and identity (Turner 1990, 8; Kapferer 1984). Yet later in his career he suggested that scholars, joined by performers and artists, should supplement their ethnographic study of ritual with actual performances of them (Turner 1982, 89–101). These suggestions were picked up by others eager to experiment with interweaving the study and the practice of ritual (MacAloon 1984, 3). A handful of laboratories for experiments in ritual and theatrical performance have been set up at various universities, although the published results have not yet had a great impact on theoretical develop-

ments. In a related development, Grimes coined the term "ritology" to denote the activity of ritual criticism whereby experts in ritual theory help communities to reflect on their own rites and design improvements (Grimes 1990, 109–44; 1995, 7–23). Hence, while some forms of reflexivity invite greater self-consciousness of the theorist's impact on the performance phenomenon he or she is studying, other forms attempt to break down such pretenses at demarcating boundaries so as to pull the theorist into an active role in the phenomenon itself. Performance theory invites experimentation with any number of these configurations. So far, however, the most positive effect has been to keep such issues open to lively debate.

As a result of these explorations, performance approaches have little concern for preliminary definitions of ritual action, especially in terms of any particular mental states (such as expressing or reflecting belief) or specific choreographic structures (such as a three-stage rite of passage). For some, this apparent logical laxity merely condones general methodological subjectivity. Yet this retreat from prior definitions may also reflect a major shift in understanding how to go about wielding analytic categories. Performance theory does not analyze the phenomenal data by shepherding it into preliminary categories; rather, it tries to ask questions that disclose the holistic dynamics of the phenomenon in its own terms as much as possible. Most radically, it does not start out assuming what religion and ritual are; it attempts to let the activities under scrutiny have ontological and analytic priority, while the scholar deploys tools to untangle those activities in ways that can inform and modify his or her notions of religion and ritual and not simply attest to them.

A classic study of cultural performance describes Jacob Kovitz's ninety-fifth birthday party at a Jewish senior citizens center. In this analysis, Barbara Myerhoff (1984) focuses on the way ritual action could construct collective interpretations of reality even in the face of the unexpected, specifically, Jacob's demise in the course of the festivities. While Jacob had wanted to make the occasion an affirmation of his hopes, the community of elderly, Yiddish-speaking Jews, all immigrants from Eastern European *shtetles* that no longer existed, sought to construct from it a validation of lives on the brink of personal and communal obliteration. With his well-to-do sons attentively at his side, Jacob had hosted a generous community-wide party on his birthday for several years running, ostensibly as a way to raise funds for Jewish causes but actually as a central event in the psychological and social life of the senior citizens' center. His ninety-fifth birthday celebration, like the others, was not a ritual in the formal Jewish tradition. It was a secular event that made use of a combination of ritual formulas, opening with a Hebrew blessing, followed by traditional toasts, introductions of family and important guests, festive kosher food, after dinner folk songs, speeches, announcements of donations, and finally, a birthday cake with candles and the customary song. Jacob, the oldest member of the community, fell seriously ill in the months before his last party but was resolved to hold the event as usual. It began on his

exact birth date amid rumors about his health and a sense of foreboding. Whispering that the Angel of Death was at his side, Jacob himself hurried people through their parts but did not otherwise curtail the familiar routine. Finally, after the food was cleared away, he took the microphone, spoke haltingly of his love for the community, and announced a special gift to the community that would enable them to continue their annual party in the future. Then, falling back into his seat, he dropped his chin on his chest and died.

At that point, those present had to draw upon their sense of what was psychologically and socially needed in order to improvise an appropriate form of closure and meaning for the wayward event. Conscious of the need to say and do something that would make things right for the several hundred anxious elderly in the room, all the participants drew on multiple cultural strategies for redefining the situation. Jacob's oldest son, for example, instinctively refused to let the drama of sudden death overwhelm the celebration. Instead, he and others used a series of ritual-like activities and step-by-step interpretive processes to frame the death as a culmination of the significance of the birthday party itself, that is, as a testimony to the fullness of life and how meaningful its ending can be. "It was a good death," many murmured by the end (Myerhoff 1984, 167). Ritual dramatization, Myerhoff points out, is a flexible if delicate process capable of constructing meaningful events from the raw happenings of life.

It is unlikely that Jacob Kovitz's party would have figured as data in the rubric of many earlier approaches to the study of religion and ritual. In Myerhoff's framework, however, it is an event that reveals a number of distinct dynamics, both personal and communal, by which people knit together an empowering view of their lives, traditions, communities, and futures. Yet Jacob's birthday certainly remains an atypical example of religious ritual. While more standard examples of simple, routine, and overtly religious ritual may present greater challenges to a performance approach, they may also reveal more of its methodological ramifications. An appropriately routine and ubiquitous ritual for this purpose is the Chinese practice of making daily domestic offerings of incense to the ancestors, a ritual deeply embedded in complex textual and oral traditions.

Until the middle of this century, almost every Chinese home had a domestic altar, usually located opposite the main door into the central room or hall. Such altars are still found in Chinese communities around the world, although significantly less so among urbanized generations who have left the land. The standardization of this custom is such that any sort of exception to it in otherwise traditional communities attracts much attention. Usually the altar is a high, narrow table pushed against the wall that holds the main ritual paraphernalia; a lower square-shaped table in front of it holds the more extensive offerings made on special occasions. Like the main door of the house, the altar faces south while the worshipper in front of it faces north. The altar itself is divided roughly in half. Its right side (stage right, the subordinate position) accommodates several generations of ancestor tablets in the form of names and dates on a large

paper scroll, a wooden board, or smaller individual tablets for each person or couple. Traditionally a red dot next to the name denotes the installation of the soul of the deceased in the tablet. On the left side (stage left, the superior position), there are paper images and often a statue or two of the more popular deities in the region. Each side of the altar has a small incense burner placed in front of the ancestral tablets or god images, and it is customary to have two candlesticks (or electric candles) and a vase for flowers as well (Doolittle 1986, 217–25; Hsü 1967, 184; Freedman 1979, 275–7).

Usually twice a day, before breakfast and in the evening, the senior woman of the house offers incense in each burner. Typically she lights three sticks of incense, bows with the incense sticks held fanlike in her clasped hands, then places one in the incense pot for the gods, another in the pot for the ancestors, and the third in a pot just outside the main door to placate various types of ghosts. Small offerings of food or spirit money may be added on the new and full moons of each lunar month, while more substantial food offerings are made on special occasions, such as death day anniversaries, rites of passage (marriages, births, etc.), and particular festivities of the lunar year (the New Year Festival, the Spring Festival, and the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts). While the male head of the household is in charge of the more formal rites when the food offerings are made and the ancestors are addressed, the daily offerings are typically left to an older (usually postmenopausal) woman as a type of household duty. Her ritual routine takes less than two minutes to perform.

This simple act has been the subject of intense and profuse speculation about Chinese culture in particular and the essential nature of religion in general. It was at the heart of the famous seventeenth-century "rites controversy," when various Catholic missionary factions argued whether such practices were simply a matter of social morality or real (and hence pagan) religion. European scholars later pioneering the comparative study of religion collected this ritual alongside others as evidence for the origins of religion in primitive notions of the soul and fear of the dead. Today there is an enormous body of sophisticated ethnographic and historical studies relevant to any interpretation of this brief scenario. The following descriptive frameworks attempt to set out the interpretive schemes in this scholarship as efficiently as possible before explicating the specific contributions of a performance approach.

The most immediate framework for analyzing the daily incense offering has been to connect these actions with Chinese ideas concerning the nature of the living and dead, the body and soul(s), gods and ghosts, the family and lineage, filial piety, and so on. From this basic perspective, the ritual reflects preexisting beliefs about the nature of reality; when expressed in action, these beliefs are reaffirmed and transmitted to subsequent generations. At this point, however, an interpreter must decide the degree of contextualization that further interpretation of the ritual requires. If the interpreter is seeking to understand what this practice contributes to a more generalized notion of ritual or sacrifice or perfor-

mance, then he or she will tend to see it as a freestanding representation or even archetypal example of the religious belief system in practice. As such the interpreter can conceptualize various cross-cultural comparisons. The meaning of the practice will be closely tied to how it helps to define a more universal analytical category, such as ritual, or to illuminate a more universal phenomenon, such as reciprocal bonds between the living and the dead. This type of analysis, a style quite characteristic of religious studies, generates a particular body of knowledge that is clearly more geared to thinking about religion in general than about the woman's daily routine.

If the interpreter seeks a fuller understanding of what the ritual means for its Chinese practitioners, then the rite's cultural context is most important and the ritual is best viewed as inextricably linked to a larger set of ritual activities. Such a set would be comprised of other ritual practices involving gods, ghosts, and ancestors, such as the domestic cult of the Stove God, grave-based geomancy, the surname lineage hall, temple-based regional festivals, spirit mediums, and the division of temple incense. The pertinent context might extend to include imperial rites, sectarian movements that initiate followers into entirely new lineage relationships, or various other dimensions of Chinese social and political organization. One widely cited conclusion that emerged from just this type of analysis is the theory that the pantheon and practices involved in rites as simple as the daily incense offering effectively replicate the basic hierarchical principles and bureaucratic structures of Chinese society as a whole. Hence, even small-scale domestic religious ritual mirrors the organization and values of the culture (Wolf 1974).

Going beyond ritual as a simple reflection of religious beliefs or the sociopolitical organization, some analyses have also attempted to decode the symbolic structure of regional versions of this ritual in order to elucidate an underlying system, that is, a set of cultural assumptions that can account for the meaning of variations. Such studies have demonstrated strong links between these daily domestic offerings and the construction of jural authority, lineage organization, residence, property inheritance rights, and regional-national politics. From this perspective, the incense ritual is primarily a medium for constructing and reproducing a specific lineage culture, both in terms of dispositions and institutions. Nevertheless, it is far from clear there exists in practice any single underlying system of acts, symbols, or meanings from which this rite derives its significance (Li 1985).

Explicitly historical-textual approaches also contribute an important framework within which such domestic offerings can be analyzed. Starting with the early Chinese classics on ritual—the *Book of Rites (Li-chi)*, the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial (I-li)*, and the writings of the Confucian ritualist Hsün Tzu— it is clear that the elite perspective on ancestor worship saw it as closely connected to the regulated expression of the social distinctions that ordered society. Social status, for example, determined the degree to which a family could perform an-

cestral rites (Watson 1963, 91–2, 97–8). By the medieval period, however, there was a variety of popular guides to family ritual that were less tied to the prescriptive Confucianism of the classics and more concerned to systematize what people were actually doing (Ebrey 1991, 37 f.; 1995). In response, the Neo-Confucian revival begun in the eleventh century attempted to revitalize the classical rites (and social order) with new guidelines that eliminated class distinctions and accommodated some of the popular proliferation of ancestral offerings in the home and at the grave. As a result, the relationship of ritual activity to a pervasive tradition of textual prescriptions is an important dimension of cultural practice in China, not only for the social location of the actors but for the larger significance of the ritual to those involved in it—most simply, whether they see themselves as part of the so-called great tradition or as simply upholding local and familial customs in ignorance of, or resistance to, this tradition.

These frameworks for analyzing the daily incense offerings approach this particular religious activity as an instance of a definable, unified, and coherent phenomenon known as ritual, that is, as a matter of relatively scripted actions, structurally distinct from nonritual action and possessing certain apparently universal properties (like formality, repetition, and divine beings). Although it is widely understood that any particular ritual practice or corpus changes over time and place, the identity of ritual as a phenomenon is usually taken for granted. This set of assumptions may be responsible for making ritual—and specifically this ritual—important to arguments concerning the underlying unity of Chinese culture or religion.

A performance approach to the daily domestic incense offerings ritual might well include some or all of the above frameworks, but it would be characterized by a few other emphases as well. First of all, a primary concern with performance would attempt to approach this humble act in terms of a specific ethnographic instance instead of a generalized description in the abstract. By using a particular ethnographic instance, the researcher is able to minimize the assumptions that any observer brings to the action. Yet this can be a very difficult requirement, and perhaps no more so than in the case of this specific rite, which is so commonplace that no one has recorded a routine instance of it. The most detailed descriptions available generalize the activities of whole villages or all ancestor rites; the most careful ethnographic studies assume some such general model and then search out variations from it, such as families without any domestic worship, those with more than one lineage on the altar, or atypical behavior attributed to the ancestors (Ahern 1973; Harrell 1976; Li 1985; Wolf 1976). While such studies may build on observations of numerous particular instances, subsuming the specific into a generalized model can suggest more of an underlying system or structure than there actually is, as well as divert attention from the way any ritual performance does what it does precisely because of its more specific qualities.

A performance analysis of Chinese domestic offerings might also pay particu-

lar attention to the movements of the body in space and time, notably the way these movements define a total cosmic orientation at the heart of the home. The relative positions of gods, ancestors, human beings, and ghosts do not only organize spatial relations (north, south, east, and west) but qualify and hierarchize them as well (north of oneself is superior, the left position facing south dominates the right, etc.). The woman's mute movements in these directions create a holistic set of values embodied in a very tangible orientation to a structured cosmos. The temporal sequence of activities at the altar similarly defines the coming and going of the day, year, and generation. Even use of the incense burner, which transforms matter into smoke that ascends into the invisible world, effectively defines the universe into bifurcated realms and powers to be properly mediated. Intrinsic to this sort of performance is the actor's assumption that she is not *creating* this environment but simply *responding* to a de facto organization of reality. In the same way, the senior citizens interviewed by Myerhoff did not see themselves constructing the meaningfulness of Jacob's death at his birthday party; even as they helped orchestrate the event, they saw themselves as responding to what unfolded with its meaningfulness impressing itself on them from without, by the hand of God, the virtue of Jacob, or the destiny of the Jewish people. The Chinese grandmother who lights incense and distributes the sticks in their various pots does not see herself reconstructing a complex cultural system of binary categories—living descendent/dead ancestor, benevolent gods/malevolent ghosts, family deities/community deities, high/low, superior/inferior, female routine care/male formal ceremony, and so on (Ebrey 1995, 107). Yet performance analysis suggests that the particular efficacy of her actions as action lies in how she creates and modifies such realities while never quite seeing the creation or the system as such.

The third emphasis of a performance approach is the rather different orientation toward questions of context and agency that follows from a primary focus on a specific set of actions. At its extreme, which may not always be useful, such a focus highlights what is most distinctive about the situation—how *this* woman lights incense in *her* house *today*—and downplays any prior notion of ritual, duty, or textual prescriptions as the most significant context for analyzing her actions. Therefore, the interpreter is able to define the context in ways that have more to do with the specific actions, such as all the other routine tasks in this woman's day, or all the other activities involving incense, or even table tops. When the specific performance is the starting point of the analysis, the relevant context within which to analyze the actions is no longer automatic. Of course, the full context of this woman, her family, and her culture is inexhaustible and not amenable to analysis without radical reductionism. But the principle of reductionism must be determined as part of the analysis; it should not be imposed by invoking ritual or religion, the social or the sacred. This emphasis on the particular repositions the researcher to explore as context whatever sets of relations, symbols, and attitudes the activities themselves imply. In other words, per-

formance analysis shifts the emphasis from how some system is expressed in these activities to how this performance simultaneously invokes (and thereby both constructs and plays off) a strategically defined set of terms, values, and activities. A performance does this by means of various personal (conscious and unconscious) and cultural strategies that the actor uses in what she does and how she does it. Since this particular type of incense offering has been one of the most uniform practices in Chinese religion ritual in recent centuries, there is only a little room for personal or local flourishes. Nonetheless, by virtue of small emphases in the performance, the woman's routine will evoke her obedience to lineage demands, her prestige in a partnership with that lineage, a deep devotion to a deity in contrast to token respect to the ancestors, fears about grandchildren, or a socialist impatience with superstitious nonsense.

A performance approach is alert to the micropolitics that are always involved in these routine acts, the ways in which people manipulate traditions and conventions to construct an empowering understanding of their present situation. For example, the daily incense offering has been called an "act of obeisance" of junior to senior, living to dead, woman to male lineage (Wolf 1974, 159). Although offerings to her husband's ancestral lineage are a significant part of the marriage ritual, a woman usually assumes the daily routine of tending the altar when the ancestors on the altar have become the kin of her own children. And such duties inevitably involve a negotiation of power. For example, her care of these nonblood kin is thought to have important consequences for the well-being of the family, and there is some suggestion that her role in this activity could be used to make her influence felt (Freedman 1979, 272; Ahern 1975, 175–8, 180–2). The textual history of these offerings suggests that the two-minute performance also harbors long-standing tensions between canonical practices to the ancestors and more popular worship of gods, while what are understood as canonical practices are themselves shaped by tensions between dyadic descent-line practices that give a prominent place to women and collective descent-group practices that banish women from all rites save this routine care (Ebrey 1995, 126).

Basic to this woman's understanding of her own activities is a series of unsystematic cultural classifications that have little to do with a broad category like ritual. Self-conscious participants in the classical tradition have distinguished between *li* (usually translated as ritual, propriety, or etiquette), a term with major political ramifications that denotes authentic and orthodox ceremonial based on clear textual sources, and *su*, the popular customs of the people so often deemed vulgar and improper (Ebrey 1991, 11). According to many of the textual authorities that this woman or her family could consult, offerings to the ancestors should have nothing to do with belief in their existence and ability to make a return on one's piety; only the common people regarded worship as a medium for influencing spirits. Moreover, in the context of *li* and *su*, domestic use of the incense burner has been a highly contested symbol in power struggles between

local cults and the state. One recent study argues that the presence of an incense burner defines a local cult as an autonomous institution structurally opposed to imperial power and the bureaucratic system (Feuchtwang 1992, 126–49). Ostensibly classical and orthodox worship of the ancestors can be performed and interpreted in ways that make it deeply resistant to major aspects of the political and cultural unity identified by other interpretations.

In the end, a performance approach does not usually offer a definitive interpretation of a set of ritual actions. Indeed, it is better at conveying the multiple ways in which such activities are meant and experienced, as well as how such multiplicity is integral to the efficacy of ritual performances. This approach can, therefore, actually undermine reliance on concepts like ritual, especially the notion of ritual as a universal phenomenon with a persistent, coherent structure that makes it tend to work roughly the same way everywhere. One could even push the current state of performance theory further to argue that the imposition of an unduly predefined concept of ritual to activities in Chinese culture could threaten our ability to recognize and analyze how these activities actually work. Outside of the prescriptive literature, for example, Chinese domestic offerings show regularities and some systematic features, but there is no evidence of a system or model as such. Attempts to formulate a system run into counterexamples and regional differences very quickly. In the words of one experienced ethnographer, we must confess our failure to find adequate generalizations and hold to "the stubborn facts" (Wolf 1974; 1976, 339).

The terminology of performance emerged partly as a logical corrective to flaws in other approaches and partly as a response to new experiences and evidence concerning ritual action. Nonetheless, many of its basic ideas are not new; more than a few voices in the older literature set out similar ideas. What is new is the holistic framework based on metaphors of performance (as well as action and practice) and the ease with which this framework has been broadly accepted. However, when performance becomes a dominant metaphor that is systematically developed and applied, its insights may begin to cost more in terms of systematic oversights.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to current performance theory lies in its tendency to flirt with universalism, that is, to substitute performance for older notions of ritual in order to create a new general model of action. This tendency toward universalism and essentialism spawns many of the smaller problems afflicting performance analyses, such as the tendency to assume that performance is a single, coherent thing, sufficiently the same everywhere, that to approach something as "performance" implies a general formula for explaining it. Indeed, several attempts to get beyond earlier universals have ended up rooting performance in prelinguistic grammars or the biogenetic legacy of the reptilian brain (Staal 1989; Turner 1983, 226). Without denying the value of further exploration of generative linguistics or sociobiology, such conclusions may fail to include any significant cultural basis for ritual action.

Other analyses are apt to see a performative dimension to everything. In the more sophisticated versions of this argument, theorists find a wide variety of activities—theater, sports, play, political spectacles, and so on—to be similarly structured media that draw upon universal qualities of performance. Unquestionably, the processes of creative socialization seen in cultural patterns of play, theater, and sports are very relevant to understanding religion. As noted earlier, these studies have made important contributions by seeing beyond the cultural boundaries that sharply distinguish all these genres of activity. In particular, they point to the significance of a deliberate, self-conscious "doing" of highly symbolic actions in public as key to what makes ritual, theater, and spectacle what they are. Yet such studies often fail to deal with the accompanying issue, namely, why it is that societies draw their own distinctions among these activities. To conclude that Chinese domestic offerings demonstrate aspects of a human proclivity for performance can illuminate certain aspects of these offerings, but it will tell us nothing about how Chinese practitioners of these offerings might compare their actions to those of a local theatrical production (Ward 1979).

Performance terminology is also used to illuminate fundamental similarities in the enterprise of the "observing scholar" and the "performing native." Some analyses attempt to collapse this dichotomy, while others try to create a third place where the two parties can meet in a more egalitarian series of exchanges. Yet the value of these explorations is severely constrained by their failure to pursue the source and significance of the differences that really exist between such enterprises. Universalism also pays little attention to important historical differences in how people perform their customary activities, the significance they ascribe to them, or the ways they re-create them. For example, a scholar of Chinese imperial history wonders if our modern category of ritual can do justice to events in the reign of the Chinese emperor Ming Shih-tsung (1524), whose ministers risked their careers and lives by objecting to plans to change the titles by which the imperial ancestors were ritually addressed. Is our understanding of ritual able to explain the full moral, political, and cosmic ramifications of such titles for these people (Fisher 1979, 84–5)? The same sort of question is raised by the anthropologist Talal Asad (1993), who suggests that the tendency to analyze ritual in terms of decoding the symbolic cannot do justice to the way in which religious activity in the medieval European church was understood as a matter of discipline for the development of virtue.

Asad's concern is borne out by a recent ethnographic study of table rituals in a modern Catholic convent. The researcher found an enormous emotional and intellectual gap between an older generation who grew up understanding ritual to be a matter of repentance and self-discipline, and a younger generation that saw ritual as an opportunity for communal and celebratory expression of shared values and bonds (Curran 1989). Similarly, an analysis of the ceremonies by which the European nations in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries claimed hegemony over what was to them "the new world" finds activities

with utterly different styles, logic, references, and symbols. While the French arranged courtly processions, the Spanish made formal speeches, the Dutch drew up maps, and the British set up fences and hedges. Moreover, the cultural bricolage that made these newly devised ceremonies authoritative to their compatriots made them completely impenetrable and irrelevant to everyone else (Seed 1995). The most basic models of ritual—what constitutes it, its purpose, and how to go about it—can differ dramatically in one small community and in a seemingly obvious "class" of activities. Any analysis of underlying commonality must also provide a complementary study of the significance of the historical or perceptual differences. Otherwise, and more subtly, universalistic tendencies end up valorizing what is identified as the panhuman dimension, accessible only to the scholar, in contrast to the secondary, even problematic, status of what becomes the culturally specific site of difference. Nostalgia for the ethnic wisdom of vanishing customs and ceremonials will do nothing to redress this type of asymmetry.

There is much that we do not yet understand about the construction of categories and the formation of frameworks for analysis and knowledge. It is sobering, for example, to consider the evidence that scholarly promotion of the concept of ritual, which some would replace with the term "performance," has significantly affected how many people today think about and engage in their own religious activities. Popularly understood as a dimension of all human religiosity that transcends specific forms of cultural and confessional activity, the notion of ritual has effectively relativized the internal authority of long-standing liturgical traditions and emerged as the basis for revising canons and fostering new styles of ritualization—notably styles that emphasize the communal, the performative, and the symbolic. It is this popular understanding of ritual in America today, which assumes cross-cultural similarities in how people seek the spiritual, that brings Protestant suburbanites to embark on Native American vision quests and mainstream churches to offer classes on Zen meditation (Bell 1997). Indeed, the general openness to performance terminology among scholars today may be rooted in many factors other than the logical improvements this term offers over others. It may be related to the politics of negotiating less reductive and arrogant relationships between the people who study and the people who are studied. It may also reflect a more thoroughgoing secularism (and disenchantment?) that minimizes religion as any sort of distinct cultural system.

Programmatically, there is nothing that performance theory can do to solve all these issues. Critical terms are not critical because they contain answers but because they point to the crucial questions at the heart of how scholars are currently experiencing their traditions of inquiry and the data they seek to encounter. Performance theory—broadly conceived, flexible, hospitable to difference and experimentation—needs to resist becoming a formula with which to process the data of difference into some premature vision of universal humanity. We are entering an era in which what we want to learn cannot be learned if our termi-

nology overdetermines the theater of engagement. It is an era in which our terms are best used as a minimalist set of props with which we can begin to engage ideas and inquire into practices that may well modify the surroundings. If performance terminology can evoke this type of open stage as well as it has evoked the dramatic fullness of human action, it will continue to be a vital asset in modern discourse on religion.

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