



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE  
HUMANITIES



**MONTCLAIR STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

*Seeing What Takes Place:  
Exploring Immersive Experiences of Religious Ritual*  
Workshop Agenda and Goals  
June 11-12, 2022  
Montclair State University  
Digital Media CoLab | Schmitt Hall 135

# Our mission (you've already chosen to accept it...)

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To determine best methods for the production of pedagogically useful and theoretically sound immersive experiences of religious practices and identifying effective steps towards creating such resources.

- **Project goal A:** Begin curating a list of rituals to film in prototyping and production.
- **Project goal B:** Determine features of proposed resources.
- **Project goal C:** Decide upon the level of extended reality for the project and the related requirements.
- **Project goal D:** Establish best practices for actualizing resources.
- **Project goal E:** Outlining strategies for next steps.

# NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Grants

- *Level 1: Discovery* – Support small research projects or early stages of larger projects, such as the following activities.
- **Level 2: Prototyping** – Support projects that have completed an initial planning phase and are poised to scale up based on prior research and development with a well-defined work plan.
- **Level 3: Production** - Support the expansion of mature projects with an established user base and strong dissemination plans beyond the applicant institution.

# Collaborative Resources

- Recording for posterity and transparency (and recall)
- Shared Google Drive folder
  - Questions
  - Video Samples
  - Agenda
  - Scholarship
  - Other
  - Contribute as you feel!
- Canvas course (you're invited)

# Defining ritual

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- Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (1977): “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests” (183).
- Roy Rapaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999): “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers” (22).
- Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place* (1987): “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process of marking interest... ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference” (103, 109).
- Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997): “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” (x).



# Religion For Breakfast – What is Ritual?

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# Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (2009)

- “I will use the term ‘ritualization’ to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of **various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors**” (74).

# Rite Selection

If the strategies used towards establishing an assertion of difference are all culturally specific, how can we select a subset of those strategies that will allow interested and ignorant parties to better understand the religious practices and lives of others?



# Ritual taxonomies

## Emile Durkheim

- Positive rites, negative rites, piacular rites
- Instrumental v. expressive rites

## Victor Turner

- Life-crisis rituals v. rituals of affliction

## Ronald Grimes

- Rites of passage v. marriage rites v. funerary v. festivals v. pilgrimages v .  
Purification v. civil ceremonies v. rituals of exchange v. sacrifice v. worship v.  
magic v. healing v. interaction v. meditation v. rites of inversion v. ritual  
drama

## Catherine Bell

- Rites of passage / life-cycle rites v. Calendrical and commemorative rites v.  
rites of exchange and communion v. rites of affliction v. rites of feasting,  
fasting, and festival v. political rituals

# Other considerations (Julia)

I found it helpful to try to spell out some possible areas of inquiry explicitly to ground the ensuing pedagogical, methodological, technical, and logistical questions. To the extent that a ritual sheds light on any of the fundamental questions that the group identifies, it would help to identify that ritual as an important one for inclusion in the project. E.g.:

- What worldview/ cosmology is being conveyed through this practice/ ritual?
- How does the practice/ritual shape a particular sense of identity?
- What kind of collectivity/ social structure is being conveyed/ forged through this practice?
- What kind of a relationship between the material and the spiritual is being conveyed through this practice?
- A question about *generativity*. One aspect that might not be as explicitly defined in the literature is that of what the community is constructing (or it's just my lack of knowledge of the literature) so it might be interesting to ask what is being *created* through these rituals (e.g. new identities, collectivities, new skills, new knowledge, etc.). I'm thinking here of very specific guidelines in the Baha'i community for example, around collective decision-making as well as elections, which require attention to the question of generativity to be more fully understood.

# As ritual, so religion

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- Any attempt to define 'religion' is doomed as it artificially asserts a separation between a sphere of life called 'religion' and the rest of a person's existence.
- Clifford Geertz, *An Interpretation of Culture* (1973): "Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting mood and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (90).
- Talal Asad's response: you can't isolate something called 'religion', symbols themselves can't act, religious lives are lived fully within their social, historical, and political context; it is not a privatized mental activity that is voluntarily assumed but utterly engaged with all facets of life.

Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”  
in *Relating Religion* (2004)

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- “There is no data for religion... Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative act of comparison and generalization.”