



## Lecture 9: Religious Actions

## Bonus Assignments Module:

1. Bonus Homework Assignment: This only goes to one of the 8 homework assignments for the course. Follow the instructions carefully to obtain the full mark
1. 2. Bonus Tutorial Marks: You have the opportunity to make up tutorial marks by attending the remaining FSGs this term. Each FSG session is worth 0.5 marks and you can earn up to 2 marks by attending four sessions.

# Scripture is a relational concept

- Graham pg 8195
- Shape and content don't automatically make a text scripture
- Book's holiness is real when communities consider it sacred
- "Scripture" defined by community's view as powerful and meaningful
- Varied interpretations across different groups
- Relational and contextual aspect vital in religious text study
- "Scriptural" features not inherent, but related to community role
- "Scripture" is a religious and historical concept, not a specific literature genre

# Scripture and Sacrality

- Scripture's power is demonstrated through key features and common practices.
- Crucial attributes include remarkable authority and sacredness compared to other texts.
- Scriptural books carry supernatural authority and holiness in both centralized and decentralized religious traditions.
- The authoritative nature is evident when a sacred text forms the legal foundation for communal order (eg, Torah in Judaism, Qur'an in Islam, Vinaya section of Tripitaka in Buddhist monastic code)
- Extraordinary sacredness of scripture is evident in various aspects of communal life.
- The reverence for scriptural text includes handling, mentioning, citing, reciting, or reading.
- Theological doctrines are developed to distinguish scripture ontologically from all other texts, emphasizing its profound sacred nature.

# Words and Power

- Both spoken and written words considered powerful in human perception.
- Words not just symbols, but actions performing tasks.
- Ritual utterance of a name believed to exert control or summon the named.
- Sacred word for believers is not just a word; it's an effective, saving word.
- Transformative power often linked to being spoken or written by a deity (Jewish, Christian, Muslim traditions).
- In some cases, sound itself considered sacred (Indian traditions) or scriptural word seen as saving truth, independent of divine origin (many Buddhist traditions).
- Power of spoken scripture seen in religious practices, especially worship.
- Examples: Veda recitation in Brahmanic ritual, mantra recitation in Hindu and Tantric traditions, dhikr in Sufi tradition in Islam, Buddhist chanting and singing of sutras and mantras.
- Perceived power present in both official religious practices and popular spirituality.
- Magical beliefs extend reverence to a copy of sacred scripture, believing in the presence of divine wisdom or ultimate truth in the text.
- Example: Placing hand on a Bible during a legal oath reflects notions of scripture's sacred power.

# Transitioning to Religious Actions

Religious studies have focused excessively on 'belief' influenced by Christian perspectives, but we are broadening our comprehension to include behaviour and belonging.

Religiosity encompasses more than belief, and we need to move beyond 'scripture' to understand it fully.

The term 'ritual' is often used as a catch-all for religious actions, but its universal applicability remains in question.

Ronald Grimes' article sheds light on the challenges of conceptualizing religious actions, which I will discuss in today's lecture.





## Types of Religious Actions

- Prayer
- Charitable Acts
- Study and Reflection
- Pilgrimage
- Conversion and Testimony
- Ethical Living
- Fasting and Abstinence
- Community Building

# Prayer: A Communication with Higher Powers

Carl Olson says, "Prayer can be comprehended as a form of communication between humans and higher powers. The word is derived from a Latin term pre-care (to beg or entreat). Prayer is also evocational in the sense that it calls forth a network of symbols related to sense experiences, moods, emotions, and values. This aspect of prayer is associated with rhythmic repetition, symbolic language, sounds, sights, ritual gestures, and dance movements. Prayer is a ritual act that possesses a pragmatic character. It also represents a performative utterance, suggesting that the reciting of the words of the prayer is the doing of an action that makes something happen, such as healing or wish fulfillment."

(Olson 2011,188)



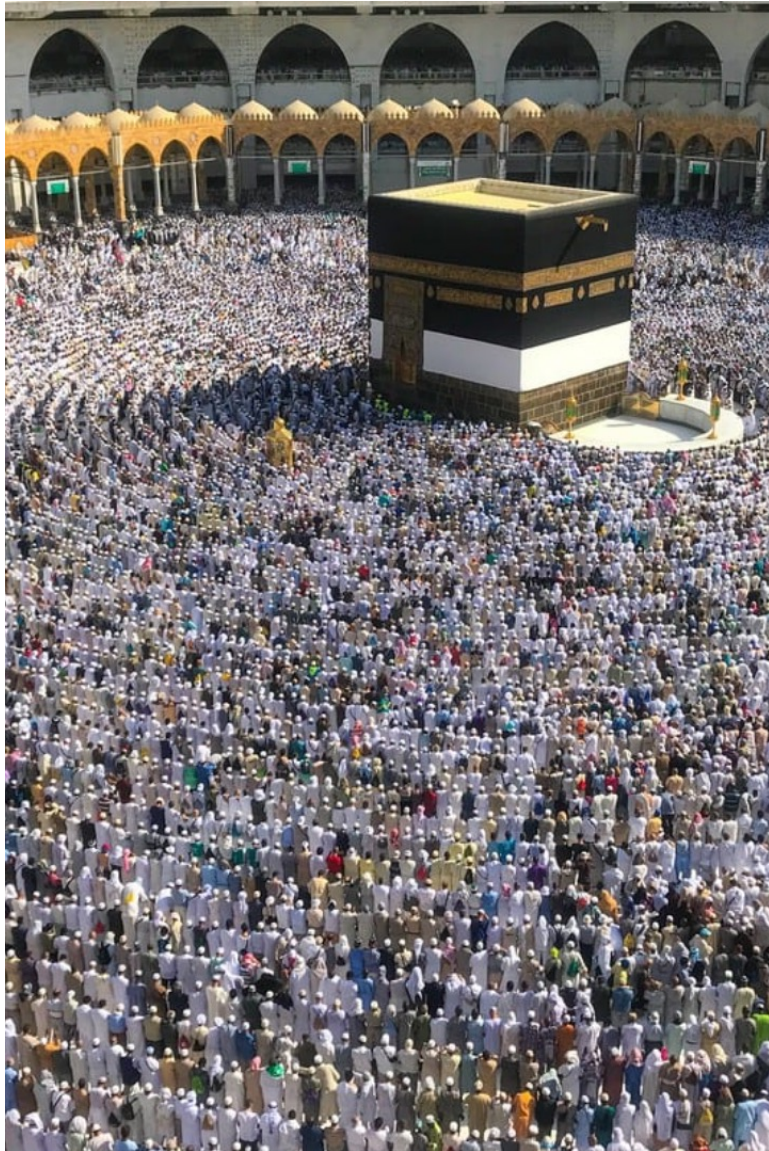
# Examples of Prayer:

## Muslim prayers:

- Can be simple words that ask God for things (du'a)
- physical movements including standing, bowing, sitting, and touching the forehead to the ground accompanied by sacred words (salah).

## Navajo prayers:

- Prayer is sung, singer is performing and composing
- Eight types of prayer, each serving specific purposes such as blessing ceremonies, restoring health, expelling malevolence, addressing disorder, recovering lost means of a healthy life, seeking protection, and remaking and restoring Holy People.



# Pilgrimage

- Pilgrimage is an interior or external journey, or a combination of both, to a place considered sacred within a pilgrim's religious tradition.
- Examples of sacred places for different religions:
  - Jerusalem for Jews
  - Rome and places visited by the Virgin Mary for Christians
  - Mecca for Muslims
  - Seven sacred cities for Hindus
  - Locations associated with the life of the Buddha for Buddhists
  - Golden Temple in Amritsar for Sikhs



## Festivals

- Special occasions that bring people together to celebrate and pause work.
- Blur social distinctions, challenge norms, and allow role changes.
- Re-establish connection between devotees and deities, symbolizing change and stability.
- Repeat divine actions and re-enact birth of cosmos for renewal.
- Involve excess, destruction, and waste, with dancing, singing, eating, and drinking.
- Holi festival in India celebrates devotion to Krishna with colored dyes and water.
- Involve public processions of sacred objects mark sacred time.





## Early Ritual Studies

- Like early study of religion, early ritual studies was highly problematic.
- In the late 1800s and early 1900s, researchers started observing and recording rituals in the field.
- Rituals were seen as actions representing beliefs and values of a society.
- Researchers interpreted rituals from an outsider perspective, seeking hidden meanings that they thought they could somehow 'see' and understand.
- Later, scholars blurred the lines between scholarship and religious practice.
- Participant-observation is a staple of religious studies and anthropology.

# Defining Ritual: Complexities and Perspectives (Grimes)

- Ritual is not a precisely delineated analytic category.
- Categories of ritual include festivals and other cultural practices.
- Ritual is not necessarily religious.
- The terms "ritual", "rite", "ritualizing", and "ritualization" are used interchangeably.
- Some scholars argue that the notion of ritual is a Western construct.
- However, many religious studies scholars still find value in the concept of ritual.
- Scholars continue to use and theorize the term.
- There are broad definitions of ritual such as "culturally defined sets of behaviour" and there are much more narrow ones like "traditional, prescribed communication with the sacred."

# Ritual Characteristics and Categories

- Contemporary definitions take a middle route, highlighting common characteristics.
- Rituals are seen as a style of action
- There is no unanimous agreement on specific qualifiers for rituals
- Ronald Grimes suggests sixteen categories of ritual action, including rites of passage, marriage rites, pilgrimage, and worship.
- Catherine Bell breaks it down into four categories: rites of passage, calendrical rites, rites of exchange and communion, and rites of affliction



# Dr. Henry: What is Ritual?

Difficult to come up with objective definitions

Scholar Jonathan Z. Smith offers a different perspective, asserting that "ritual is above all an assertion of difference."

Rituals, then, employ culturally specific strategies to create differentiation.

Catherine Bell: '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' (Bell 1992: 74)

# Malory Nye: Rituals and Meaning

- A basic assumption about ritual action is that it has some sense of meaning and purpose, even if that meaning is not immediately obvious.
- The study of ritual often entails the search for these meanings, particularly in actions which appear meaningless either to observers or to those performing ritual actions.

He argues that a basic definition of ritual could be:

"A basic definition could even be that rituals are actions carried out for more than their utilitarian purpose. That is, rituals are actions which have meanings beyond the actions themselves. Perhaps a simpler – indeed minimalistic – definition of ritual is 'meaningful action'. (Nye 133)



## Nye: Rituals and Symbolism

"[R]itual may be seen as 'symbolic action', and symbols are at the heart of rituals." (Nye 2014, 135)

- Symbols, in the context of understanding rituals, are things—either material or non-material—that represent more than just their physical characteristics.
- The things that are symbolic in the religious system itself are culturally determined, and we would have to have familiarity with that system to be able to determine what symbolic ritual action means.
- Example: The Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper, is a ritual in Christian traditions involving consumption of bread and wine. The symbolic meaning of the Eucharist varies among Christian denominations.
- Christians generally believe that during this ceremony, the bread represents the body of Jesus, and the wine represents his blood.

## Nye: Rituals & Communication

“[R]ituals are often a means of communicating messages to participants. That is, through the performance of a ritual activity, those involved may come to be aware of some idea or concept or viewpoint.” (Nye 2014, 138)

-Communication can be subtle and non-subtle, verbal and non-verbal





## Nye: Rituals and Rites of Passage

- Rituals have transformative power
- Some rituals can transform a participant's view of the world or themselves; confer new status, title; change social status, group membership
- Happens in significant times of life (eg. birth, adulthood, death)
- Main participants are transformed into a new state with a different lifestyle, identity, and social group
- Two notable scholars are Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep

# Arnold van Gennep: Rites of Passage

- Rites of passage consist of three crucial stages: separation, liminality, and incorporation
- Participants initially undergo **separation (pre-liminal stage)**, detaching from their usual world, roles, and obligations
- The **transition or liminal stage** is marked by crossing a symbolic threshold and is a vital part of the transformative process
- The final **incorporation or post-liminal** stage signifies the participants' return as transformed individuals with new roles
- Van Gennep emphasized the variability of these stages, with no fixed duration





## Liminality (the in-between stage)

- The phase of liminality is emphasized here as it is the crossing between the before and after
- Liminality is the space of change where participants are fundamentally transformed
- The liminal stage often involves a passage or movement, which can be physical or symbolic
- The liminal stage may entail an inversion of 'normal' life, marked by different forms of dress, place, and behavior
- Behavior during the liminal stage may be the opposite of what is usually considered correct
- Alternatively, solemn behavior requiring isolation and quiet contemplation may be expected