

The Sacred Quest

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Chapter Five: Ritual

Ritual Defined

- A ritual is a ceremonial act or a repeated stylized gesture used for specific occasions.
- In society, there are many civic rituals.
- In American courts, raising the right hand, swearing on the Bible, and reciting an oath signifies the obligation to tell the truth.
- In everyday life we participate in numerous personal rituals.
- Shaking hands as a sign of mutual trust
- Standing in honor of a particular person

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Give an example of a ritual that orders your interaction with others.

What is a ritual that has important meaning for you and your friends or family? Explain.

How does ritual help us to understand the ways that religion is more than a set of beliefs?

What are the best arguments for and against the following claim: "Religion begins with ritual and it remains ritual before it is anything else."

How can ritual go wrong? What happens when it goes right?

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Ritual in Religious Contexts

- Ritual plays an important role in every religious tradition.
- Some religions are famous for their ritual character.
 - Roman Catholicism
 - Russian Orthodoxy
- Other religions are known for their resistance to ritual, but even these religions have certain stylized forms of behavior that are rituals.
- Society of Friends (Quakers)

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Mythos and Ritual

- One of the most common forms of ritual involves acting out or dramatizing religious stories.
- The conjunction of myth and ritual serves as a way for people to participate in the creative power of the sacred.
- In many tribal societies people not only remember the tribal myths but also live them and act them out.

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Ritual Reenactment

In tribal societies, creation stories may be ritualized through dance and gesture at particular times of the year so that people reenact - the first deeds of gods and goddesses.

The Greek tragedy is derived from the ritualized worship of the Dionysus.

The modern drama derives from the acting out of the Easter story in French monasteries during the Middle Ages.

The Passover

- The **Passover** meal is also called the seder, a Hebrew word that means “order” or “arrangement.”
- Commemorates the meal eaten by the Jews as they were delivered from slavery
- Retelling the story of the **Exodus** is central to the meal
- The **Passover** meal is not merely a historical remembrance.
- For Jews participating in the Passover meal, there is a combination of memory, worship, and hope.
- To celebrate the Passover is to become ritually one with those who first observed it before leaving Egypt.
- Thus, Jews celebrate an ancient story in their tradition by reenacting the story in a highly ritualized fashion

Note: - At Passover, Jews all over the world gather in their homes to share a formal meal involving the eating of symbolic foods, various readings and prayers, and a number of blessings. - The meal is orchestrated by the head of the household, who conducts it according to well established traditions.

- Passover commemorates the meal eaten by the Jews the evening before they left Egypt and the enslavement of their people in order to journey toward, and eventually reach, the Promised Land.
- Central to the Passover meal are the great events described in the Bible in the book of Exodus.
- One of the high points of the meal comes when the youngest person present at the table asks why the meal is eaten. The response comes in the form of a reading from the haggadah.

Holy Communion

- **Holy Communion** in Christianity functions in ways that are analogous to the **Passover** in Judaism.
- The various Christian communities give diverse interpretations of the significance of communion.
- However, all Christian groups agree that when they celebrate the communion meal, they are reenacting events connected with Jesus of Nazareth.
- The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as the letter of Paul known as First Corinthians, describe a ceremony involving the use of bread and wine, which are given significance through words attributed to Jesus.
- Holy Communion is a ritual reenactment of this story.
- Like the Passover meal, the celebration of Holy Communion carries a meaning that the community of believers, long after the event itself, wishes to restate.

Other examples of Religious Rituals

- In **Shi'a Islam**, the “passion plays” of the month of Muharram reenact the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala in 692 C.E. and draw members of the Shi'i community into an eternal drama in which good suffers in its struggle with evil.
- In Shinto, the rituals performed at shrines throughout Japan reenact the conflict between Amaterasu (the sun goddess) and Susanoo (the god of storms) and enable participants to feel themselves a part of the struggle to bring order to the world.

Rites of Passage

- Rites of passage describe those ceremonies associated with the transitional moments in a person's life.
- All religions provide rituals of some sort or another
- Rituals may be turned to be **nominal** believers to observe customs of tradition (e.g. weddings)
- **All rites of passage have three phases—separation, liminal, and reintegration.**

Note: - All religions provide rituals and/or theological rationales to commemorate such moments. - Even nominal believers who feel no great need to observe most of the customs of a tradition may still turn to religion for rites of passage.

Types of rituals

Birth rituals

Rites of Initiation

Rituals of Mourning & Death

Rites of passage of time, e.g. cycle of the year, cycle of seasons

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Birth Rituals

- Although some traditional cultures actually ritualize the moment of birth, “birth rituals” usually refer to rites connected to the newborn and its parents.
- For Jews and Muslims, circumcision initiates male children into the religious community.
- In Christian communities, baptism makes the child a member of the Christian church.
- Hindus use a ritualized feeding to initiate a male member into the duties of his caste.
- Similar meanings are given to birth rituals in the various religious traditions, even though the forms are quite diverse.
- People celebrate the safe passage of the infant from the womb into the world; they welcome him or her into the family; they give the child a name; they pay homage to the creative power of the sacred.

Rituals of Initiation

- Rituals of initiation celebrate and symbolize the passage of a person from childhood into adulthood.
- While the specifics of this rite varied in different cultures, the outlines of the ceremony remained rather constant:
 - ritual segregation from the larger group and some form of testing
 - the actual ceremonies of initiation
 - reentry into the group as a recognized adult

Initiation Rites in Postmodern Society

- In contemporary society, many young people go through a traditional rite of passage, but the “adults” are not really adults for some time after their “passage.”
- Today, the most common ritual of initiation is marriage.
- Many elements of the marriage rite hearken back to ancient rituals.

Rituals of Mourning and Death

- Different religious traditions ritualize the mourning process in various ways.
 - Taoist rites include an elaborate ritual involving an enactment of the soul’s journey into the underworld and its rescue and delivery into heaven by ancestral spirits.
- Many burial rites symbolize the relationship of human beings to the natural world.
 - Pious Hindus in India cremate their dead and consign the ashes to the river Ganges as a sign of the never-ending cycle of life and death.

Rituals of Mourning and Death

- Funeral rites are intended to accomplish different ends in different cultures.
- To aid the spirits of the dead to journey through the afterworld either by providing symbolic gifts for them (ancient Egyptians and native peoples of North America).
- To provide living “guides” for the dead (Taoism).
- To help the souls of the dead to purge sin (Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy).

Temporal Rites and Celebrations

- The observance of cycles of time has been a central characteristic of most, if not all, historic

religious traditions.

- For people who hunted, gathered, or planted, the cycle of the seasons was crucial to life. As a result, great celebrations and rituals were associated with the change of the seasons.
- Even in modern industrial societies, many of the great festivals continue to take place in conjunction with the change of the seasons.

Religious Meanings of Ritual

- Ritual is so closely identified with formal worship that one can generally say that the ends of ritual are the ends of worship.
- Traditionally speaking, worship promotes one of these four ends or purposes, or a combination of them:
 - Adoration
 - Thanksgiving
 - Petition
 - Penance/purification

Adoration

- Basically, adoration means acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the Sacred over the person.
- Adoration means the acknowledgment that one is not self-sufficient, but dependent.
- In religions with a personal, transcendent God, there are basic ritual gestures assumed in moments of prayer that dramatically illustrate the concept of adoration.
- In religions without a transcendent deity, the focus is on the search for enlightenment and the primary gesture of adoration is meditative.

Thanksgiving

- Because one of the basic insights of many religious traditions is that the world and all its bounty flow from the world of the sacred, it is only fitting that such traditions emphasize the need to acknowledge that gift.
- The most common form of thanksgiving is the ritual act of giving a gift. Such donations may run from the formal act of a sacrifice, to the leaving of a gift at an altar or shrine