2nd edition

the basics

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6

RITUAL

The previous chapter ended on the point that it is unhelpful to make a distinction between religious belief and religious practice. Being religious is not simply a matter of holding certain ideas in the head – it also involves doing things. Most obviously, religion is done through rituals, or ritual actions (although not all rituals are necessarily religious), and I will examine below the many ways we can try to understand and interpret ritual. But the practice of religion is not only to be found in rituals; rituals are just one particular type of bodily place in which religiosity is practised. More generally religion is practised in the lives people lead, their daily activities, and in how they interact with other material things, such as texts, objects, and places.

RITUAL AND RITUALISING

As we have found with many of the other basic terms in the study of religion, the term 'ritual' is not as straightforward as it may seem. For a start, there is the tricky boundary between religion and ritual – something may be a ritual, but might not necessarily be religious, and possibly vice versa too. Of the two terms, 'ritual' does sometimes win out over 'religion', since it covers a more immediate and less abstract concept than 'religion'. Indeed, some

writers, such as the anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1985), suggest that the study of religion would be better framed as the study of ritual. This might be a useful alternative to the problems involved in the term 'religion', so long as we have a reasonable sense of what we mean by the term ritual. Where the term ritual is helpful, however, is in the emphasis it puts on the *practice* of religion, the things that people do, which the more traditional focus in the study of religion (on texts and beliefs) has tended to obscure.

However, there remain significant problems with the term 'ritual' raised in the work of Catherine Bell, who I have discussed in part in the previous chapter. In two very influential books written in the 1990s (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* and *Ritual*) she argued that the term ritual is itself misleading. That is, by talking of 'ritual' we are suggesting that 'it' is a 'thing' with a nature of its own. Indeed, 'ritual' is used to describe very varied types of behaviour, helping us try to understand things (activities) that other people are doing. In many ways, this is the same problem that we have encountered (in Chapter 1) with the term 'religion'. Our understanding of both religion and ritual is somewhat obscured when we try to view them as 'things' – they are not things, instead they are terms that refer to a diverse range of ways in which people behave and act in the world. Rituals are not 'things', nor do they do things: people do rituals. To encourage scholars to think differently about rituals, to emphasise their practicality, Bell suggests we avoid the term 'ritual' if we can (although she herself has been unable to do so in the titles of both of her books!). In place of the 'r-word', she suggests the alternative of 'ritualisation', or more specifically to talk of 'ritual behaviour' as a way to describe forms of activity (or practice) that are done with a 'sense of ritualisation'.

This is not simply a matter of splitting academic hairs. Indeed it is much easier just to say 'ritual', and get on with talking about ritual and rituals in practice. And of course 'ritualisation' is a bit of a mouthful. But if we think carefully about how the word 'ritual' is used, we find that a substitution of the idea of ritualisation (or even ritualising) makes us see the process in a rather different light. When we look through Bell's lens at ritual actions, we focus less on the 'rituals' in themselves (as pre-given actions with a life

of their own), and more on the way in which the people doing rituals are making certain things happen. That is, actions labelled rituals are 'rituals' because they are a means of creating and using a sense of ritualisation.

This being said, however, it does not really answer the basic questions we might have about what the term ritual refers to, nor why rituals (or ritualisation) are such a fundamental element of the study of religion.

WHAT IS RITUAL?

Let's start with some attempts to define rituals. Ronald Grimes, in his book *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, suggests that 'ritualizing transpires as animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places' (Grimes 1982: 55). For Felicia Hughes-Freeland, 'ritual generally refers to human experience and perception in forms which are complicated by the imagination, making reality more complex and unnatural than more mundane instrumental spheres of human experience assume' (Hughes-Freeland 1998: 2). Catherine Bell (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*) argues that '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). Roy Rappaport presents the definition of ritual as 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers' (Rappaport 1999: 24). Whilst for Victor Turner, ritual is 'formal behaviour prescribed for occasions not given over to technological routine that have reference to beliefs in mystical (or non-empirical) beings or powers' (Turner 1982: 79).

Most of these writers agree that rituals are a matter of doing something, performing actions, particular types of behaviour, and engaging in that behaviour in certain ways. However, as with definitions of religion, we are probably wise not to try to create any definitive definition – indeed writers such as Bell suggest that there cannot be any universal definition of the subject, since what ritual is depends to a large degree on the local context.

It is fairly clear that ritual behaviour is a very important element of cultural life – it is, in fact, impossible to think of a culture where there are no rituals. However, most ritual behaviour is done unreflectively, out of habit without even thinking about whether there is any meaning and purpose behind the action. Sometimes, in fact, it is the automatic-ness of such ritual action that encourages us to call it ritual, in the sense of ritual behaviour being unthinking and meaningless. So, for example, if we greet a friend in the street we do not reflect on the significance of the greeting, we merely behave as we are expected to behave – we say 'hello', wave or shake hands, and ask 'how are you?' However, not every ritual action is performed in this unthinking way – some may be performed more solemnly. Worshippers taking communion in a Christian church are usually expected to be serious, and to reflect on the significance of the ritual they are participating in. In this case, it is perceived that the ritual action has a meaning, and those taking part should try to understand that meaning.

There is, however, no single aspect of ritual that such activity can be boiled down to. Ritual actions 'do' many things, in different ways, and of course are experienced in very different ways by those who participate in them. If I attend a particular ritual event – for example, a friend's wedding or funeral – the meaning, purpose, and experience of that event will be rather different for me than for anyone else who is present. We need to bear this in mind as we talk of rituals and ritual action: the purpose of studying and analysing rituals is to try to understand the many ways in which ritual activity is performed and experienced, and the many things that are going on as a person (or a group of people) participates in a certain type of action.

To map out some of these diverse aspects of ritual activity, and also to see how various writers have sought to interpret ritual, we can concentrate on eight particular ways of looking at rituals. These are: (a) meaning; (b) symbolism; (c) communication; (d) performance; (e) society; (f) repetition; (g) transformation; and (h) power. The degree to which each of these elements is emphasised in any particular ritual may vary greatly, but they are all significant to a certain degree.

In sum, the types of action we call ritual can be any type of behaviour: both those that are obviously religious, and also actions

which have seemingly little to do with what we expect 'religion' to be about. Ritual behaviour can range from something as simple as saying hello, or visiting a bank manager, to elaborate ritual and religious activities such as marriages, circumcisions, funerals, and even national events such as presidential inaugurations, memorials, or coronations. Ronald Grimes suggests that there are sixteen different categories of ritual action (including rites of passage, marriage rites, pilgrimage, and worship amongst others), whilst Catherine Bell breaks it down into four (rites of passage, calendrical rites, rites of exchange and communion, and rites of affliction). Whether we choose one or other of these schemes, the term ritual is intended to refer to a variety of activities. In most, if not all, cases any action which is described as a ritual involves some special behaviour and special ideas and symbols, which mark the action as being ritualistic.

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. For example, the greeting of a friend is not merely functional, it expresses the relationship that exists between two people, and the type of greeting (and how it is performed) demonstrates the intensity of the relationship. For example, we may hug our mother, shake hands with a friend, kiss a lover, or merely say 'hello' to our tutor. Furthermore, the performance of the greeting demonstrates that we are acting correctly according to our cultural traditions. To fail to greet someone you know, or to greet them inappropriately, is to be 'rude'. This all gives meaning and purpose to the simple action of saying 'hello'.

The study of ritual, therefore, often entails the search for these meanings, and particularly in actions which appear meaningless (either to observers, or to those performing ritual actions). Very often it is the latent meaningfulness of an action which leads us to describe it as 'ritualistic'. 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'. This definition is by no

means watertight, and throws up more problems, since the 'utilitarian' purpose may well involve the meaning behind the ritual action itself. When most Hindus marry, the bride and groom walk together around a fire. This is not merely to keep themselves warm, or to stretch their legs after a lengthy period of sitting down, instead many Hindus interpret the action as representing the path they will be walking through life together as a new couple.

John Beattie describes this as a distinction between 'instrumental' and 'expressive' actions (Beattie 1964: 202–5). Instrumental acts are performed primarily for their practical value: to achieve some goal, to get something done. Thus a surgeon will cut open a patient's body and perform an operation to heal that patient. In contrast, expressive actions are performed for more than this obvious goal, they are done to express certain ideas, or maybe to act out in symbolic form (i.e. through abstract representations) ideas or wishes that cannot be achieved on an instrumental level. Thus ritual actions are defined as different from other forms of action because they are never solely instrumental, since the meanings attached to them make the actions expressive.

However, the distinction between the instrumental and the expressive is in practice quite ambiguous. For example, if I drive my car to work in the morning, then that could be described as a purely instrumental action: I need to travel the distance from my home to the office, otherwise I wouldn't be able to get there. However, as I drive my car I may be making some kind of expressive statement: the car may be big and flashy, showing I am wealthy enough to afford a 'good' car, or otherwise it may be more modest or run-down. In this way, many instrumental actions can have an expressive element, and many expressive actions can also be done instrumentally, and we must not forget the line between the two will be drawn differently by the people who are involved. For example, a wedding may be performed for the 'simple' sake of getting married, but also to show many other things as well: the love and commitment between the couple, the sanctity of the institution of marriage, and even the conspicuous wealth of the family who are hosting the event. Likewise, someone who attends a service of prayer for peace may take part literally (instrumentally) to bring about that peace, or otherwise to participate in the sentiments and hopes that are expressed through the ritual actions.

A word of caution needs to be noted at this point, however. Such a search for meaningfulness is rather similar to the emphasis on belief that I discussed in the previous chapter. To describe ritual behaviour as 'meaningful' does suggest that the action is worthwhile and comprehensible, and above all has value because we are able to explain it (even if the participants do not supply us with such meanings themselves). Perhaps we should not rule out the significance of some forms of ritual behaviour that are not apparently meaningful. Or to put this another way, some rituals may be significant because their meaning is not clear or discernible.

RITUALS AND SYMBOLISM

The search for meanings in rituals, and particularly Beattie's distinction between expressive and instrumental action, is founded on a *symbolist* approach to religion and ritual. That is, the importance and significance of rituals is that they 'work' through symbols. According to this view, therefore, ritual may be seen as 'symbolic action', and symbols are at the heart of rituals. Indeed the writer Victor Turner defined symbols as 'the lowest unit of ritual' (Turner 1967).

If symbols are so fundamental to the understanding of rituals, what do we mean by the term 'symbols'? Broadly speaking, symbols are things (material, and sometimes non-material items) that represent more than their material properties. They may often be visual objects, such as the Christian cross, or the Star of David, but this is not always the case. A special sound – such as a word, or a piece of music – may also be symbolic, in that it has a significance which goes beyond the sound itself. Symbols are thus items which have meanings and associations which are not intrinsic to their physical properties. There is nothing about a piece of wood shaped into a cross that intrinsically links it to the Christian associations attached to it of human redemption, resurrection, and the triumph of good over evil. The *associations* between the object and the ideas are arbitrary in the sense that they are *culturally determined*. Because of this arbitrariness, the meanings or significances behind symbols may not be immediately obvious.

For example, cow dung and *ghee* (clarified butter) have important symbolic values in certain Hindu rituals; blood trickling from

an opened vein is of great symbolic importance in many Native Australian rituals; and the act of male circumcision is a symbol that is found in many cultures (although the meanings behind this symbol vary greatly). In each case the symbols are important because of their specific culturally determined meanings. A Christian may know why the eucharist or mass is important and the place within that ritual of bread and wine is symbolic of the 'body of Christ' – because they have some idea of the stories and ideas that lie behind it. Likewise a Hindu may take for granted the significance of *ghee* in sacrificial Vedic ritual. Looking at another's symbols, however, the substances may appear meaningless (and sometimes even repulsive), because we have no idea of their meanings.

In this approach, therefore, it is necessary to ask questions about the meanings and symbolism within actions: what are the associations between ideas or concepts and the symbols that are used to represent them? There are very few, if any, universal symbols, with meanings that are the same throughout all cultures. Several branches of psychoanalysis work on the assumption that there are such universal symbols. For example, Carl Jung's (1978) theory of the 'archetype' is based on the assumption that there are some fundamental symbols with meanings and associations shared by *all* humans. There is, however, little evidence to support this view: the presence of similar symbols in different contexts across the globe does not by any means imply that they all have the same meanings. Thus, for example, certain objects may make obvious symbols – such as the human body, or the by-products of the body such as faeces, blood, saliva, and semen. These 'natural symbols' (cf. Douglas 1973) appear again and again in the rituals and symbolic ideas of many people – in western cultures as much as in any others. But in each place they have specific culturally constructed meanings and references.

However, a thing-which-is-a-symbol does not have a single reference to be discovered, each symbol will have many *meanings*, some of which may be obvious, and others less so. For example, some symbols are considered to be specifically 'religious' – such as a Christian cross or a Jewish Star of David – since they are used primarily to represent ideas related to religious things. But the same symbol may also represent other ideas, some of which may

not be specifically religious, or at least not in a narrow definition of religion as being concerned with spirits or gods.

For example, the Christian cross does not only represent the Christian message of salvation, but a host of other ideas as well. Thus a cross can also represent the authority of the church (for example, a bishop's cross demonstrates his power as a bishop), or the distinctiveness of Christianity vis-à-vis other religions (e.g. the cross as representing Christianity, in distinction to the crescent representing Islam, and the star representing Judaism). In some cases it can even be used to represent different Christian groups – such as when crosses and crucifixes are used to display the differences between Protestants and Catholics.

Each symbol, whether it is specifically religious or not, will have a wide range of such meanings associated with it, some of which may be more important than others, or more relevant to a particular context than others. The multiplicity of meanings that symbols can have is a vital element in the importance of symbols. When symbols are used in rituals, or in any other area of life, some meanings may be emphasised more than others, but the less obvious meanings or associations are still present, and may indeed be manipulated. This is well known to advertisers, who make careers and money out of the manipulation of symbols. A television commercial for a car uses a host of associations that a car symbolises: that is, a car is not merely a piece of metal used for transportation, it can also symbolise masculine virility (and sexuality), freedom, power, wealth and status, and many other things as well. When persuading us to buy a car, advertisers try to play upon these latent associations, manipulating them in subtle (or overt) ways.

In conclusion, no symbol can mean purely one thing. Instead it will have many different meanings, all of which are culturally determined, and can only be understood in the context of the specific cultural and local context. The analysis of the symbolic dimension of ritual action is not about discovering what a symbol or a ritual actually means, but how meanings are constructed and manipulated as people participate within certain contexts. Such a study of ritual as symbolic actions emphasises the sorts of transformations that are brought about by a ritual. But at another level, we can ask how a certain view of the world gets communicated to the participant by taking part in the ritual.

RITUALS AND COMMUNICATION

This brings us to the area of ritual and communication: rituals 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. This can happen in subtle ways, for example, through demonstrating the ideals of social life. Familiar rituals within western culture – such as marriages, funerals, and Thanksgiving, or Christmas – all involve a stress (in different ways) on the idea that the family group should be together. Through performing the ritual, that is, by visiting one's parents or other family for a festive dinner, the performers become aware of the importance of the ideal of 'family togetherness'. Even if the meal is a shambles, and everyone descends into bickering and arguments, the ritual process may well still communicate to those involved what the ideal should be, even if they don't live up to it.

Such messages may not necessarily be communicated clearly and unambiguously. It is quite possible to participate in a ritual (even a very significant one) without understanding it consciously. There is a common perception amongst western Christian traditions that this is hypocritical – that if the ritual is not understood (i.e. if the message is not communicated clearly and unambiguously) then it is meaningless, and even 'mumbo-jumbo'. Such a viewpoint, however, is rooted largely in the Protestant Christian view of faith preceding action, which I discussed in the previous chapter, that this is a theological perspective that might not work in other contexts.

So far I have assumed that rituals usually communicate in subtle ways, that they have hidden messages which are not straightforward despite their importance. But rituals may also communicate in very unsubtle ways, especially if they involve some verbal communication. When a Christian priest declares a couple 'husband and wife' at the end of a marriage service s/he is making an unambiguous statement about their relationship. When a preacher gives a talk, the message s/he communicates is often far from subtle. But even when there is this clarity of communication, it must also be remembered that the ritual may be communicating other messages *as well*, albeit more subtly.

The anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1989 [1974]) suggests another way to view the relationship between rituals and communication. Bloch argues that ritual is a type of language, albeit it is rather different since the basics of 'ritual language' are more formal and rigid: there are no words, and so rituals are harder to contradict. Thus, put simply 'you cannot argue with a song', or any other ritual performance, short of stopping the ritual itself. But the ways in which ritual languages work are quite distinct from verbal language, since they allow for far fewer variations in expression. Usually the form of a ritual is quite fixed: one does a certain action followed by another; a symbol may also be used in certain ways, and overall the format structures the performance. In contrast, an idea may be expressed through words in numerous ways. This, therefore, makes rituals quite distinct types of action, setting apart the experience from other aspects of life. At the same time, however, rituals are quite stable activities – since it is harder to innovate with a ritual, they are transferred through time in a form more unchanged than a spoken language.

Although there is much to be said in favour of Bloch's argument of ritual as a special type of language, it is in the end more of an analogy than an actual theory. The pseudo-linguistic element of ritual actions is interesting, highlighting how such actions are a form of non-verbal (as well as verbal) communication. But it is not the only way to understand the various practices that we call rituals, unless we wish to widen our understanding of the concept of language, and press the analogy harder than it probably needs to go. We should also keep open the idea that innovation in ritual is not only possible, but also happens regularly: the performative element of rituals makes each ritual action unique in its own way. In this sense, we could say that if ritual is a type of language it may be more similar to verbal language than Bloch's argument suggests.

RITUALS AND PERFORMANCE

As I have stressed already, rituals require action: they are a form of behaviour that is done. Ritual action won't happen simply by thinking about it; someone has to do something, people have to take part in it, and engage in it on a personal level. The performance

may be fun to do, it may be a chore, or it is possible to perform a ritual without even thinking about it. Ritual action therefore is performative, involving people doing things (either consciously or unthinkingly), doing activities in a particular way.

To a certain degree ritual activity is often like theatrical performance. The script of a play may be read and understood, but it is not properly a play unless it is fleshed out with actors performing its various characters and their roles. In the same way that actors and audiences experience the themes and the important meanings of a play through its performance in a theatre, people will only understand the significance of rituals through engaging personally in a performative way.

The performance of ritual may involve special types of behaviour – a participant may be expected to assume a certain attitude, or to speak in a certain way, or to do certain actions. Much of this behaviour may be quite different from what is done in 'normal' life; it may even be the opposite of normal behaviour. In some cases there may be a particular 'script' or liturgy to follow – if one is attending a Christian marriage service, or a Jewish Passover Seder there are particular lines of speech that must be said, in order for the ritual to be completed. In the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, it is the protagonist's (played by Hugh Grant) refusal to follow the marriage service script and say the words 'I do' that marks his decision not to complete the wedding, and so remain unmarried. This prematurely completes the service unfinished, and results in him receiving a black eye, through being punched by his erstwhile bride-to-be. The script was clear and unambiguous – both for the fictive characters within the film, and for the audience – and the punishment for going 'off script' was severe (in the short term).

In most cases, however, there is no particular script, and instead participants are expected to improvise, but in doing so they must behave (and perform) appropriately. For example, at many funerals it is often hard to know exactly what to say, but everyone knows what type of behaviour is expected (calm, sympathetic, sombre) and what would be considered inappropriate behaviour (loud, jocular, outrageous). It is by taking on the particular role within a ritual context, and by becoming that role to a certain degree (by making that role part of one's own subjective experience),

that the activity becomes meaningful. This personal element of performance means that no two ritual performances are ever quite the same. Even if the 'script' is fixed, the performers will always be different in some way (as may the location, the background of the ritual, or any other factors). The end result is that each ritual becomes specific to its circumstances.

Of course, rituals are not completely like theatre. Theatre is only a special form of ritual, which has strict rules of performance (for the audience as much as for the actors). All ritual actions involve a measure of performance, but it does not require a theatrical virtuoso to perform a ritual.

RITUALS AND SOCIETY

A fundamental assumption of most twentieth-century studies of ritual has been that we cannot understand a ritual without relating it to the social context in which it is performed. Although there may be such things as personal rituals – actions that I do for myself in private – most rituals have a social dimension. They are done with reference to groups of people.

On one level this takes us back to the idea of studying the relationship between religion and culture. If ritual is a form of religious practice, this is not simply a matter of what an individual person does. It is instead bound up with a much wider network of relationships – other people, and the cultural values and practices of that wider group. What individuals do as rituals links them to the group in some way. As I will discuss below, this is expressed most obviously in studies of ritual as transformation, as individuals undergo rites of passage through which they do not simply change as individuals, but their group membership and identity also become transformed.

Lurking somewhere behind this link between rituals and society is the influence of Emile Durkheim, who I discussed briefly in Chapter 2. As I mentioned, for Durkheim (1964 [1915]) religion has a binding role for societies – religion brings people together and makes them feel part of a larger cohesive whole (society). And it is through ritual in particular that this happens, according to Durkheim. That is, ritual actions do not only involve people in relationships with each other, the performance of rituals actually

creates those relationships. At its most simple level this argument suggests that regular attendance at a religious ritual (for example, men going to the mosque each Friday) creates a sense of togetherness – through meeting others at the same place each week one enters into relationships that would not otherwise have existed.

Such an argument is so simple that it is both profound and trivial. It is true that some rituals may encourage this sense of solidarity (in some cases quite deliberately, as exemplified by large-scale events such as Hitler's Nuremburg rallies in the 1930s). But the argument also serves to trivialise the significance of the social dimensions of ritual activities. Not all rituals have a binding effect, ritual actions can also set up divisions and oppositions. The Ulster Protestant tradition of Orange Parades through Catholic neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland is perhaps a good example here. There are in fact many ways in which we can understand the connections between social relationships and ritual activities, particularly with relation to issues of power and control as I will discuss below.

RITUALS AND REPETITION

If there is one single element that is usually associated with the performance of rituals, it is repetition. That is, if any action is carried out time after time, then that often leads us to classify the action as a 'ritual', simply because it is repeated so often, and so mechanically. To this extent, we can often talk of the 'ritual' of going to a bar, or to a lecture, or the ritual of kissing our grandma goodbye. On this basis, we could say that any action, no matter how trivial it may be, is 'ritualistic' – for example, the act of cleaning one's teeth, or of catching a bus every morning.

The association between rituals and repetition works in another way, however, that is at the level of repetition within the ritual activity. Rituals often use repeated actions: such as visiting a building regularly, praying or meditating daily or weekly, or performing a stereotyped mode of greeting (like always saying 'hello'). At the same time, ritual actions often involve repetition within themselves: they may involve saying or doing the same action again and again. In Protestant church traditions the common order of service is structured hymn, prayer, hymn, prayer, and so on. It is, however,

not only actions that may be repeated – the symbols used within a ritual are very often repeated and recycled.

Various theories have been used to 'explain' such repetition. Thus Edmund Leach (1976) argued that the repeating of ritual elements is a function of the way in which rituals are communicative. The more something is 'said' in the ritual, the more chance it will get through to the participants, in the same way a physical message sent more than once, say by email and text message, is more likely to reach its intended recipient. Others, most notably Claude Levi-Strauss (1968), have argued something more subtle. That is, the meaning of the ritual is transmitted through the relations between symbols and ideas in the ritual, and so the frequent repetition of symbols (often in a variety of different contexts) also means a repetition of the structural relationships between the symbols. Levi-Strauss' best example of this is the symbols we often find in rituals representing the concepts of nature and culture, non-human and human, raw and cooked, and a number of other binary divisions.

The repetitiveness of ritual also encouraged the great psychologist Sigmund Freud (1990b [1924]) to put forward his theory that ritual is akin to, and derived from, the actions of neurotics, who have fixed patterns of behaviour which they repeat again and again. This psychoanalytic theory of ritual assumes that ritual is merely a collective neurosis, demonstrating an unhealthy state of mind, as people (in groups and individually) find comfort from the pressures of the world in ritualistic/neurotic behaviour. One problem with this theory, however, is that it attempts to 'explain' social action in terms of individual psychological pressures – it is rather unhelpful to try to reduce the complexity of collective ritual actions primarily to an expression of sick minds. What is equally problematic about it is that there is far more to rituals than their repetitiveness.

A significant recent approach to the repetitiveness of ritual is that of Harvey Whitehouse (2002, 2004), which was discussed briefly in the previous chapter. For Whitehouse, like Freud, there is an important connection between the structure and function of ritual action and psychological mechanisms. But unlike Freud's psychoanalytic approach, Whitehouse emphasises the relationship between the repetitiveness of ritual and cognitive psychological

approaches to the ways in which the human brain structures experiences as memories.

According to Whitehouse, it is necessary for rituals to, first, 'take a form that people can remember', and, second, 'people must be motivated to pass on these beliefs and rituals' (Whitehouse 2002: 295). This works in two ways, that is, through two types of ritual practices. As described in the previous chapter, what Whitehouse calls the 'imagistic' mode relies on high intensity ritual practice – such as 'traumatic and violent initiation rituals, ecstatic practices of various cults, experiences of collective possession and altered states of consciousness, and extreme rituals' (2002: 303). The function of such ritual actions is to trigger high levels of memory retention, which he argues are of great importance to ensure participants remember the detail of the event. On the other hand, the 'doctrinal' mode relies on far more routine and mundane ritual actions, that is, rituals which are performed on a daily or weekly basis and involve very regular repetition. For Whitehouse, this repetition creates a different type of memory, as so he argues 'it is simply a psychological reality that repetitive actions lead to implicit behavioural habits, that occur independently of conscious thought or control' (2002: 300).

Therefore, in the case of regular routine rituals the repetitiveness of the action serves to teach and inculcate in the participants the action of the ritual, whilst for those rituals that are more infrequently practised, it is necessary to rely on more spectacular (and often traumatic) subjective experiences for the participants.

RITUALS AND TRANSFORMATION

When talking about the symbolic dimensions of ritual actions I mentioned briefly that rituals can transform participants' perceptions of the world. It is this transformative element of ritual that has fascinated many writers on ritual, primarily because one of the most obvious and widespread elements of ritual action across the world has been to create changes – either in an obvious physical or social way, or at a more subtle level. Participating in a ritual *may* make the world actually change. Rituals of circumcision are obviously transformative: when a boy is circumcised he undergoes a lot of pain as his foreskin is cut off, which once done marks a

very obvious and irreversible change to his penis. Circumcision rituals performed on women in certain parts of the world (most notably in some parts of North Africa) create even more severe physical changes: involving (in some cases) clitoridectomies and the removal of much of the soft tissue of the vulva (and the lasting health and other consequences of such dismemberment).

On a (usually) less traumatic level, marriage services are also clearly transformative. The married couple are not obviously different after the ritual from how they were at the start. But by going through the ritual their views of themselves become transformed, as do other people's perceptions of them. The transformation is a conceptual transformation; the ritual brings about a change in people's conceptions of the world, and the social relations between those who live in that world. In fact, many rituals involve a change in a person's social status and their social-group membership, and such rituals – which have become labelled 'rites of passage' or 'rituals of transition' – are often the primary focus of ritual studies.

'Rites of passage' can be any rituals which involve major transformations in some way or other. Such rituals most usually occur at important times within a person's life, and so in many cultures there are rites of passage associated with birth, child-bearing, and/or the beginning of adult life. The change that occurs to an individual at his/her death is also often marked by a major rite of passage, demonstrating the transformation of that person from the world of the living to the world of the dead. In all such rituals, the main participants are transformed by the performance of the ritual itself into a new state, which most usually has associated with it a different type of lifestyle and identity, as well as membership of a new social group.

Two writers in particular are associated with the study of rites of passage in the last century: the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, and the British anthropologist Victor Turner. In particular, van Gennep's work *Rites of Passage* (1960 [1908]) set out a theory which is still highly influential in the area of ritual studies. Whilst in a series of books in the 1960s and 1970s, Turner discussed the ways in which key elements of van Gennep's scheme could be explored.

Van Gennep suggested that ritual actions often work in significant ways to transform people's concepts of time, space, and

society. That is, rituals very often help to divide up time and create a sense not only of the passage of time, but also its measurement (into years, weeks, and so on), through the celebration of New Year feasts as well as personal temporal events such as birthdays and anniversaries. Likewise, physical boundaries are not only used through rituals, but are also created by rituals. Thus not only are certain rituals performed in special places (such as Christian services in churches), the performance of rituals also sets up boundaries and divides up the world. Thus an action as simple as removing one's shoes on entering a mosque, or covering one's head on entering a synagogue, sets up the significant boundary between outside and inside the building.

However, the most significant and well-discussed element of van Gennep's argument is his threefold (or tripartite) scheme, which he presented as being the basic structure of all rites of passage. That is, he argued that all rituals which involve transition have three important stages: *separation, liminality,* and *incorporation.*

The first stage of rites of passage usually involves some *separation* between the participant and the world in which them normally live. In this way the person is detached from the roles and obligations that have been associated with their lives up until that time. Such a separation may be portrayed in a very extreme form – with participants being regarded as 'dead' during this phase. The second stage of this ritual process was labelled *liminality* by van Gennep. This stage (like the other two) may last a long time, or it may be very short, but he argued it is a vital part of the transformation which rites of passage attempt to achieve. The word liminality has its origins in the Latin word '*limen*' which means a threshold. During this middle stage of the ritual the participants are expected to cross a threshold which marks the boundary between the world that they are leaving behind and the social world which the ritual is preparing them for. This threshold, which is betwixt and between two different worlds, is demonstrated in various ways in ritual. The threshold may be marked out physically, for participants to cross in some way – for example, by making them walk over a step or a line on the ground, to jump over a barrier, or to walk through a door.

It was this idea that rituals so often work on a concept of threshold that was enthusiastically pursued by Victor Turner

(1967, 1969). For Turner, the threshold may also be marked in more abstract ways, by creating a sense of difference. This is often achieved by making use of behaviour and ideas which show a discontinuity with how things are normally meant to be.

Thus the liminal stage may entail an inversion of 'normal' life, marked by different forms of dress, a different place, and different kinds of behaviour. In fact, behaviour may even be the opposite of what is usually considered correct. If one is normally expected to be well behaved and respectful then the liminal phase may require participants to be disrespectful and badly behaved, as in the raucous behaviour of pre-wedding 'stag nights', or the wild exuberance of colour-throwing during the Hindu Holi festival. In many such rituals one may often find a fascination with the bizarre, with things that are turned upside-down. In a sense this liminal stage is about the expression of anti-structure, that is, expressing the opposite of the usual structures of life, and with the opposite of what is normal.

At the conclusion of a rite of passage, for van Gennep the third *incorporation* stage gives an indication of the new role that the participants are to take on. The participants are welcomed back from liminality, as new people who will be expected to behave differently. This incorporation will physically demonstrate a link between the individual who has been transformed, and the social group into which they are entering. They may be welcomed by their new peers, or be expected to stand amongst them, or they may be given a new title or name to indicate this change. The stage of incorporation demonstrates how the ritual has inwardly transformed and outwardly changed the participants, and it installs them into a new place in society.

For van Gennep and Turner there is no fixed limit on how long each stage should last: a stage may be very brief and hardly noticeable, and indeed two stages may merge together so the differences between them cannot easily be discerned. But the scheme gives some indication of how the transformations involved in a rite of passage are brought about. It is not all that useful to simply say that all rituals move from separation to liminality and then to incorporation; this merely gives us a framework upon which to build understandings of particular rituals. Indeed, various writers (for example, Bynum 1996, Lincoln 1981) have critiqued the

universality of the concept of 'liminality', and particularly its use as a dramatisation of 'anti-structure'. The models relied on by Turner (and van Gennep) depend quite heavily on specifically *male* initiation rituals (such as the Zambia Ndembu groups where Turner conducted his research), and so may not be as widely applicable as many assume (see Grimes 2000a). This notwithstanding, van Gennep's ideas have had a powerful influence on how several generations of scholars have perceived the wider processes by which a person can be changed through ritual action.

RITUALS AND POWER

So far my discussion has focused on what could be called traditional approaches to the study of ritual. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, there were ongoing debates about why and how rituals could best be described as symbolic, communicative, and performative. There has also been intense debate about which rituals are transformative, and how and why liminality has been such a prominent feature of rites of passage.

However, in the 1990s a debate has emerged within ritual studies about the viability of the field itself. This focuses on the question of whether or not there are such things as rituals – that is, whether or not the term describes a universal category of action that can be applied cross-culturally. In a very similar way to the debates over the category of religion, it is argued, particularly by writers such as Catherine Bell (1992, 1997) and Talal Asad (1993), that the term ritual is used as an explanation, not a description. That is, when we call something a 'ritual' we then begin to think we understand what it is, since it brings to mind the analytic concepts that I discussed earlier. That is, if we label something as a ritual, then it will, we assume, also be symbolic, and transformative, etc. Instead, it is argued that each action should be understood within a broader totality of context. How does a particular action fit into a wider picture, of the person's (or people's) lives and cultures, their social and physical environment, the relationships that they have with each other, and the ways in which they themselves perceive those relations? Such questions are not answered by labelling the action as 'ritual', and indeed by imposing the label we are shutting down some of those questions rather than opening them up.

What much of this new debate focuses on is the relationship between those actions that we call ritual (for want of a better term) and the network of social and power relations in which each person lives. All ritual actions are about expressing power, about making people subordinate, or challenging such subordinacy. This can be seen most obviously in large-scale state rituals, such as the inauguration of a president, or in Britain the coronation or funeral of a monarch. One function of such rituals is not merely to make the necessary transformation – to invest the presidency or monarchy on to a person – but also to make this transformation clear to the wider social group. In particular, the rituals are performed to involve this wider group, to make it seem that they are part of the social, symbolic, and political order that is being presented through the ritual actions. By taking part in such a state ritual – whether through being actually present, or being virtually present by watching the event on television – each participant is helping to legitimise the authority and power of not only the individual at the centre of the ritual (the new president or monarch), but also the wider system of power and control.

However, we need to be careful that we do not assume that a ritual will impose such power simply because it is a ritual. Here again the distinction between ritual and ritual action is important – it is the activities of those involved which create and channel the power relations. For example, in a historical analysis of royal rituals in Madagascar, the anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1986) shows how the same rituals have, over the process of 150 years, been used in a variety of ways by different political regimes. The rituals have themselves remained fairly constant in structure, but their meanings and the ways in which participants have related to them have been adapted to changing political circumstances. In a similar way, it could be argued, the rituals of royalty of the British state are notable for their 'tradition' and constancy. For example, the funeral of the Queen Mother Elizabeth in spring 2002 was modelled on the funeral of her husband, King George VI, who had died fifty years before. Despite the similarities of the rituals (such as public processions of the coffin, and public 'lying-in-state'), it is clear that British society and culture has changed considerably during that half-century, as indeed has the role of the constitutional monarchy within that society.

But the analysis of power and ritual can be applied to *any* ritualised or ritualistic action. According to Catherine Bell, the process of setting some behaviour off as ritualised – the creation of that sense of ritualisation – is itself a way of expressing power relations. And so all ritual activity is bound up with the ways in which the participants relate to each other, and possibly to some other, non-human being. She uses as an example an act of ritual subordination: a woman going down on her knees in supplication to a deity, in the presence of male priests who remain standing (Bell 1992: 100). At one level, this action clearly expresses the hierarchical relations of power between the men and the subordinate woman. However, what are also at stake are the ways in which that woman experiences and acts out the relations of power. The ritual does not simply set up the relationship of power, it can give her a format for making meaning from it, and perhaps to challenge such relationships. Each ritual action is, therefore, special and particular – what is going on is not predetermined by it being a ritual, nor by the cultural system of meaning and symbols which lies behind it. Its meanings are dependent on the specific context, who is involved, how they perform the actions, and what meanings they choose to impose.

In conclusion, there are certainly elements of ritual activities that can be understood through looking at meanings and symbols. Rituals do involve elements of performance, communication, and repetition, and the obvious purpose of many rituals is to create transformations. But, as Bell argues, what we mean by the term ritual is most usually a 'strategic way of acting', performed by individuals and groups, through which the participants engage with and also construct particular types of meaning and value. So not only do rituals express authority, the process of performing rituals – or doing things with that sense of ritualisation – is a means by which people construct relationships of authority and submission (Bell 1997: 82).

SUMMARY

- Though not all rituals are specifically religious, the study of religion and ritual highlights the viewpoint that religion is a matter of practice, and not just belief.

- The term ritual is ambiguous, since rituals are not things that exist in themselves, but are ways of acting and behaving. Ritual is better described as 'ritual action' or, in Catherine Bell's phrase, as 'ritualisation'. Ritual is a way of thinking in action, working on creating a 'sense of ritualisation'.
- Classical studies of ritual have analysed ritual with respect to meanings, symbols, communications, performance, society, repetition, and transformation. Each of these approaches give us certain perspectives on some of the ways in which people perform rituals, but none explains 'what rituals are about'.
- As with all other forms of action, ritual actions express and create relations of power between people.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

For some useful introductions to the field of ritual studies, see Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (1982; revised edn 1995); and on transformations see his *Deeply into the Bone* (2000b). He has also written an article entitled 'Ritual' (2000a). Catherine Bell's two main works are as given at the end of the previous chapter: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992); and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997). Her essay 'Performance' (1998) is more accessible than her books, and is a good starting point, as is her recent entry in the *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (Bell 2006). A good recent introduction to anthropological studies of ritual and religion is Fiona Bowie's 'Ritual theory, rites of passage, and ritual violence', in her *Anthropology of Religion* (2005). Harvey Whitehouse provides a very useful overview of his argument on the two modes of religiosity in 'Modes of religiosity' (2002).

For further discussion of the concept of ritual and its problems, see Talal Asad, 'Towards a genealogy of the concept of ritual', in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993). See also Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (1987); Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter* (1992); and Felicia Hughes-Freeland, *Ritual Performance, and Media* (1998).