

## RLG101H FIELD RESEARCH ANALYSIS – THEORIES

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### Choosing Theories

For the Field Research Analysis you must select one theory of ritual from Malory Nye's text *Religion: The Basics*. No two members in the same Field Research group may choose theory. For example, if there are two people in the group and one of them chooses Power, the other person's theory must be of Society of Memory.

The choice of which theories to use is up to you. You should select the ones that you find interesting, that you understand, and that can help you analyze your observations. The goal in using the theories is to arrive at an interpretation that goes beyond the obvious meanings of what you see.

In this document I have attempted to help you by listing theories that are useful for analyzing the kinds of observations that are typically made during religious site visits. This doesn't mean that all the theories here will necessarily be ideal for analyzing the particular observations you made.

Finally, keep in mind that this document is intended as a guide and a supplement to Nye's text – it is NOT a substitute for reading Nye's text. You still need to go back to Nye, read through his explanations of the theory, and cite his text for your assignment. If you do find this document helpful and wish to reference it in your assignment, make sure that you cite it properly (using the Chicago Manual of Style author-date format) – failing to cite it would constitute plagiarism. You must also include the document in your bibliography, exactly like this:

Brown, Ian and Ken Derry. 2019. "RLST10 Field Research Analysis – Theories."  
Class handout: RLST100 Introduction to Religious Studies. University of Regina.

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**Please note**, in some respects everyone is observing ritual behaviour at your field site. In this respect everyone should keep in mind some general ideas about ritual:

"ritual" can describe almost all human action

- we call things rituals for our own reasons, it might be interesting to reflect on why you have classified a particular behaviour a ritual, or why the religious group you observed classified a particular behaviour as a ritual
- you have three jobs, identify two rituals, describe two rituals, and analyze two rituals
  - o what does ritual action mean?
  - o To whom is it meaningful?
  - o What symbols are involved?
  - o How do people relate to those symbols?

These are all general ideas of ritual that you can include in your observations of rituals.

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## 1. RITUAL

### 1. Rituals and society (pp. 141–142)

This is Durkheim's fairly straightforward theory about rituals and relationships. Key questions you might ask if you decide to use this theory are:

- a) Does a particular activity bring people together? Does a particular activity drive some people apart?
- b) What might the act of bringing characters together/driving them apart *mean*? That is to say: What purpose do you think the ritual serves in propping up, policing, or excluding people from a social unit?

### 2. Ritual and memory (p. 143–144)

This is Whitehouse's theory about ritual and repetition. Note that he identifies two different types of ritual practices: the "imagistic" mode and the "doctrinal" mode. There are three questions to think about here: First, what mode would you classify a particular action (or experience) as? Second, what is the person learning from that action (or experience)? And third, why does this matter? There is a good chance most of the rituals you witness will fall under into the "doctrinal" category.

### 3. Ritual and power (p. 149–150)

The basic (and possibly most useful) discussion of rituals and power is Nye's summary of the theories in the first paragraph on p. 149 (remember that this is not Nye's theory; he's simply summarizing common scholarly views about rituals and power). The second paragraph on this page describes Bloch's point that the meaning of specific rituals needs to be understood in each ritual's social and historical contexts. On p. 150, Nye explains Bell's similar point that the same ritual can have different meanings for different individuals.

Focusing on Nye's summary of rituals and power, you might simply ask: Does a particular action reinforce power relations between people (or groups) at the service you went to? If so, how? Alternatively, does a particular action represent an attempt to resist or overturn certain power relations? If so, how? It's okay to be "wrong" here. If you think a particular ritual is subversive or presents an unequal power structure, but the participants think it is doing something else, that's totally okay! Since you haven't done any additional research on the religious service you're attending, you won't necessarily know the contexts behind the rituals, but you can still observe and comment on relations of power.