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Religion through Ritual

Catherine Bell

That I have never taken a course on ritual is probably not at all surprising since my formal education ended many years ago, just as Victor Turner's early books were becoming ubiquitous on college and university campuses. However, it seems a bit odd even to me that I have never *taught* a course on ritual or, more precisely, a course *just* on ritual. Yet there are two good reasons for this, both emerging from the particular context in which I teach religion. Located within a liberal arts college housed within a larger university with distinct graduate schools, my department has no graduate program in religious studies. So whenever I give some thought to this lacuna in my teaching repertoire, I always conclude that any plan for an *undergraduate* course on ritual would inevitably raise two problems. The first, and more trivial, is whether to use my own books in class: they contain nearly all the content I would want to teach. My second book on ritual, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, was not written to be an undergraduate text, but it certainly swallowed up all I had learned while teaching ritual in various contexts. Naturally, a course would engage other texts to explore many approaches, and I might even be able to ignore my own authorship, but my lectures would inevitably rely heavily on the material I had personally processed. I would teach the history that I have written or the theories I believe I have effectively critiqued and "improved." Even if I held back my own books, I fear I would inevitably overwhelm the students with details and defensive diatribes in arguments with unseen colleagues about points coming freshly to *my* mind but totally meaningless to a captive class of undergraduates.

Underlying this little dilemma is the fact that teaching students how to critically engage books, lectures, movies, and cereal boxes has been central to me as a teacher. How could I put them in the difficult (and rather unfair) position of having to be bold enough to critique the teacher's book or question the teacher's overly enthusiastic opinions?

I have asked colleagues who do assign their own work how they deal with this issue. Some reply that they don't; rather, they use their own work as a type of neutral textbook (is this possible?) and then employ a critical approach with regard to the other readings, usually primary sources. Other colleagues admit that they have tried it and soon abandoned the effort because it ultimately made everyone uncomfortable. One colleague, however, acknowledging all of these problems, remains determined to teach students that polite critical assessments are okay in the classroom (and beyond!), even if *he* has to demonstrate it by critiquing one of his own articles ("Now, what *was* I thinking when . . .") to get responses in kind. Recently I experimented using my 1992 book, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, in an advanced seminar. After working through appreciative critiques of seven or eight other readings in the historical study of religion, I assigned the first third of the book as an exercise in (a) analyzing a complex argument, (b) identifying the point(s) of one's confusion, and (c) expressing that confusion intelligently in writing using the literary mannerisms available for just this purpose. Although my mind is not made up about the value of the assignment, the format avoided the worst problems I have feared and led to some critical assessments.

Aside from this substantively minor reason, the second reason for never having taught a course on ritual is more grounded in my sense of the discipline of religious studies. Working with the expectation of having most of my students for only one course in the whole of their undergraduate careers, I am not convinced that a course dedicated to ritual is the most useful one I can provide, no matter how it might incorporate other pedagogical goals. My concern probably dates back to the late 1980s when I had the opportunity to design my own introductory course rather than continue to teach what my predecessor had made so popular. This was about the time that E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1988) was the object of much critical debate in what would prove to be the emerging culture wars. Somewhat playfully and with no allegiance to the Hirschean principle behind the project, two colleagues and I decided to try to draw up our own lists of what we thought every student taking the religion requirement should learn (and know?) by the time they graduated. Our different subdisciplines (theology, church history, and history of religions) made us suspect the results would differ, but the differences proved to be so great that it was comical to see our defensive ignorance of so many terms one or the other thought to be, or thought should be, common knowledge; inevitably, we disagreed over the importance of anything one of us did not know. Perhaps there would be

greater congruence, we concluded, if we employed some real discipline and narrowed our lists significantly (Hirsch had five thousand “essential” names, phrases, dates, and concepts). Could we manage to be sufficiently austere, and confident in our sense of selection, to pare the lists to a mere ten items?

As I remember it, the other two reasonably decided a few weeks later that they had better uses for their time. But I doggedly worked on a ten-item inventory of minimal competency in religious studies, withstood their condescension when they reviewed it, and continued to tweak the last item or two on the list for several more years. However unrealistic it may have been, this project primed me to design an introductory course less around my own disciplinary strengths than around those issues that were arguably most useful for students, that is, what would make them at least “literate” (per Hirsch) in the study of religion and religion’s main cultural extensions. With the idealism of a relatively new teacher, I fashioned a flexible ten-week course (for the quarter system) that was designed to make the students address why religion has taken the shapes that they were seeing around them, why it offered them the particular personal choices placed before them, and how it might be otherwise. In this context, ritual was clearly a central topic—and not the most difficult to make relevant and appealing.

A graduate course on ritual would be more straightforward, although not without some critical choices about presentation, most notably whether to start with data (a series of classic and current rites), the history of inquiry into ritual, or simply the most influential modern theories. Context, that is, the type of graduate program, would make a difference, but the foregoing options would still remain. And, to be honest, I suspect I would decide the course’s approach either according to whatever issues or questions were uppermost in my thinking at the time, or how much time I had to prepare. Reality always trumps one’s paper-based idealism, so it is usually better to take it into consideration from the beginning. With an undergraduate course, however, both realism and idealism dictated a different set of options.

What Is Ritual?

The introductory course that I have taught now for at least a dozen years, like so many others taught in comparable institutions, presents a number of key topics as avenues for depicting and understanding the social life of religion (social does not simply mean “to an outsider”).¹ The fact that ritual is one of just four topics in this ten-week course reflects my view of its centrality; but it is joined, and contextualized, by three other topics, namely, symbol and myth, scripture and interpretation, and types of religious communities dealing with change. Only in discussing scripture do the students feel that they are on somewhat familiar ground, which fits with their starting notions of what

makes up religion; these tend to range from inchoate images of popular culture to rigid orthodoxy of some stripe. Yet these notions are also the starting point of the course. I have learned to make clear from the outset that the course is about religion as a social phenomenon; in other words, whatever else religion might be in regard to relationships with God or other formulations of the divine, much of religion as we meet it from within and without is inevitably (and often sadly) a matter of human institutions trying to express and live out these relationships with God. We need to try to understand the variety of religious communities and institutions since they are so much a part of our world, not just as they may appear in the news, but more surely in terms of their diverse and rarely acknowledged cultural assumptions—how they are linked to internalized and projected cosmologies capable of influencing very personal engagements as well as committed political activism. Students readily discuss many examples of the way religion is an active part of the current global village—and often a confusing part at that.

The question then becomes, Can we understand religion as a social phenomenon in terms more general and analytical than those used when religions present themselves? At this point, I give the class what has come to feel a bit like a “canned” performance, dramatically describing how nearly every social scientist since the very rise of the field has predicted that religion would gradually decline and fade away, with a few notable theologians suggesting their own versions of its “death.” These experts argued that science now provides better explanations for the nature of the cosmos; modern technology promises to do away with the poverty that has made people supplicate higher powers and hope for more in the hereafter; and psychology could provide a better guide to inner growth than could a minister or the functional equivalent, people who are rarely schooled in psychological problems of basic development. These idealistic expectations were explicit before World War II, even lingering on as unexamined assumptions up through the 1960s. The class always has a good laugh at how this vision of progress has gone awry, as seen in the continuing history of challenges to scientific explanations such as evolution by religious fundamentalists, or the failure of technology to dispel poverty and the suspicion that for all its benefits, it may have created new forms of scarcity. Certainly there are real difficulties accessing truly useful psychological resources unless one is wealthy, living in a large city, or a clear danger to oneself or the public. I use Mary Douglas’s 1982 article, “The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change,” which boldly challenges her colleagues to admit the obvious: that in the wake of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the more general climate in the Middle East, as well as the politically powerful rise of the Christian evangelical Moral Majority, it was clear that the social sciences failed miserably to understand basic aspects of religion.

Since the experts have not had the right answers, I tell the class, the larger question—what is religion?—will rightly be the focus of the course. They

write out their own answers in a few sentences, some of which we read. They usually give four types of answers: religion as divine revelation and humans living in accord with it; religion as a psychological crutch for those who cannot deal with reality; religion as a moral system dressed up as a cosmology; or "I don't know." We put these away until the last class, when we can see if and how their views have changed—although I am lucky if the class has any time for it. Since the social scientists so obviously failed to understand religion, as Douglas puts it, basic questions about it remain wide open for the students to engage. Moreover, I assure them that the course will not give them any answers, nor have I any up my sleeve. It is a *real* question. We will, however, explore some major social theories to appreciate and critique their contributions; the course will also add to the students' store of knowledge about various religions so that they have a better basis for engaging theoretical considerations. By the end of the mere ten weeks available to the course, they can expect to come to their own conclusions, certainly tentative, but at least articulate and defensible.

The question of why religion has continued to thrive when most of the social scientists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries expected it to fade away makes clear to students the limits and failures of experts, the openness of basic questions, and the active role that the course expects them to take. The four sections outlined in the syllabus attempt to provide them with resources—theories and data—for forging their own answers in a series of projects. The first section, symbols and myths, introduces the psychology and phenomenology of religion; the second section, on ritual, presents basic anthropological theory; scripture and interpretation looks at the history reconstructed by biblical studies and then the interpretive role of theology; the last section, how religious communities change, provides rudimentary schooling in the sociology of religion. Along the way, the main readings use Hinduism, Ndembu religion, Christianity, and Islam as their data, while shorter readings for paper projects applying theory to data add examples from many other areas. In each case, the idea is to identify where a theory has proven insightful and arguably useful, and where it is weak by virtue of significant counterevidence or because it avoided addressing key issues. The strategy of introducing a topic that the experts had failed (so far!) to analyze and predict correctly serves to situate each student in the driver's seat as an analyst of theories and methods, encapsulated within the admittedly limited if flexible rubric of the four main topics I selected.

The first section explores psychological theories of symbols and phenomenological treatments of sacred space, time, and myth, ending up with the "hero myth" theory and papers applying these ideas to the sacred cow in India, the Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, or Aztec human sacrifice (Harris 1977; Wolf 1958; Sahlins 1978). Then we are ready to turn to ritual. Lectures start with Van Gennep's insight into how rites of passage create the effect of a change of

nature or status, a transformation of social status, by the simple use of movements in space, from passing through arches and bowers to more elaborate journeys of initiation. At the same time, the students are reading two chapters from Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969). In these pages, Turner also presents Van Gennep's model of the three-stage rite of passage (separation, liminality, assimilation) in order to generate his own theory of ritual as a dialectical interplay of structure and anti-structure (*communitas*). Just as Ann Gold describes in chapter 2 of this volume, the highly visual ideas of Van Gennep and Turner are immediately appealing to the students because they can apply them to their own experiences (with endless references to weddings and fraternity initiations!). When Turner spins his ritual model, and theory of its social purposes, into an extended explanation of the historical "stages" in America from the 1950s to the 1970s, the students follow right along with continued enthusiasm. But I call them up short, accusing Turner of letting a good theory get terribly inflated, starting with ritual structure and going on to forces of historical causation. Although Turner's theory is interesting speculatively, its sweeping breadth raises questions of evidence. We discuss the sort of proof needed for a theory and the attraction of theories that start small and specific but grow to try to explain a great deal more—an idea that will be picked up again later. Students are a little dismayed to realize that one-theory answers to the nature of ritual (and religion, or culture itself) may be misleading.

The paper projects for the ritual section give them accounts of two different ritual scenarios to analyze using three models they have learned: Mircea Eliade's idea of ritual as a return to *illo tempore*, the time before history, by reenacting the deeds of the gods (ancestors, etc.) who created a cosmos out of the original chaos; Van Gennep's three-stage rites of passage; and Turner's dialectic of structure and anti-structure (Eliade 1954; Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969). I might give the students accounts of girls' initiations among some American Indian tribes, the twentieth-century American bar or bas mitzvah, or the "temporary monkhood" of a young boy in Thailand (Lincoln 1991; Robinson 2001; Swearer 1995). When required to apply as many models to each ritual as possible, students demonstrate to themselves the viability of multiple perspectives and theoretical formulations.

During the first course section on symbols and myths, the students tend to be rather uneasy, especially in regard to Freud's theory of the Oedipal roots of religion. This is *not* what they expected in a religion course; nor is it anything like what they have thought of as religion. The examples they analyze in the writing assignment, which ask them to use the psychological and phenomenological theories studied in class to explain real data, do little to ease their discomfort. However, after a few classes on ritual in the second section, the students seem to "get" it a bit. They begin to appreciate what a theory is, how wild it might seem, how wildly it might be applied, what agendas it can

serve, and how it can be examined, modified, shot down, or developed further. They have had comparable experiences—at least, the rites of passage underlying their high school graduation, their college “orientation” process, and their growing New Year’s Eve party expectations—and the theories explicate them in a way that makes sense and adds to their grasp of the depth of the cultural routines they take for granted. However, I point out to them, many of the rites discussed so far are not “religion” in the usual sense of the word; we still have to try to figure out what religion means. Freshman orientation cannot be considered religion, so why does it have a ritual structure? Is it religion really watered down, or are rites not confined to religion in the first place?

At this point, I will introduce a grossly simplified version of Durkheim’s theory of religion as cultic activity and social formation; if the students’ eyes are not too glazed over, I will also introduce the basics of Mary Douglas’s ideas on the parallelism of the personal body and the social body, my own theory of the goal of ritual mastery to be used beyond the rite itself, and maybe even J. L. Austin on performative utterances (Douglas 1973; Bell 1992; Austin 1975). The last examples of ritual theory, tossed out to them without any supporting readings, are undoubtedly beyond most of the younger students in the class. Yet they enjoy the lecture as one rabbit after another can be pulled from the hat of theory. It pushes their sense of the “play” of theories, while tackling the larger issue of the relation between religion and ritual. However, I have had times when students became sullen or rebellious about theories that appeared to be trying to explain them, making their deeply prized bits of personal independence suddenly drown in a sea of cultural determinism. If I catch a sizable manifestation of this attitude early, a good discussion can be had. If I do not see it happening, the students drift away intellectually and emotionally, and a great deal of effort is required to pull them back to an active stance.

What Is Religion?

Religion was not always introduced in this manner. I certainly never had any such overview of topics or methods of inquiry, not even anything that could be considered an introduction at all. The closest thing was the philosophy of religion or the world religions course, the latter still popular among students and some faculty, but its cookie-cutter reconstruction of a handful of religions has become almost impossible to teach (Masuzawa 2005). General introductory courses per se do not seem to have appeared in significant numbers until the 1980s, when they were apt to be half theological and metaphysical materials (concerning God and theodicy), perhaps a novel or movie about an Eastern religion, and then a journal for some sort of self-reflection. In the 1990s, college introductory courses were more apt to analytically tie course materials

to what some spectrum of scholars in the field were currently reading, thereby admitting psychology and anthropology, in particular. Currently, introductory religious studies course may well lean heavily on anthropology to supplement phenomenological resources, and more often than not they disregard theology completely. Of course, the social study of religion has been trying to distinguish itself from theology for many decades now. It is also undeniable that theology is not interested in religion *per se*; it offers few modern discussions of how to understand other religions or address the challenges posed to exclusive claims to truth by the religious plurality of an age uncomfortable with further evangelization. Yet as a dimension of religion, the theological writings of a religious tradition (or any other means by which a tradition interprets its unchanging sacred revelations) are unquestionably an aspect of religion that students know about and should learn how to contextualize. To add theology as a topic, alongside ritual, is not very easy, but the student response is quite rewarding. They enjoy making (provisional) sense of things in the world they know, being able to place what they have met (to some degree) within a larger picture.

Multiple caveats accompany the introductory course's exercises in method and perspective, stressing that these theories not only remain open to debate, they necessitate it—having failed to predict the future of religion very accurately. Eventually, the exercises seem to reassure the students that there are larger pictures within which their cacophony of experiences can be analyzed and even stuffed into pigeonholes if they are so inclined and—this I am less confident about—that there are transferable techniques of analysis with which to pursue such investigations. Most of all, the presence of theology as a topic keeps in the air the question that forms the theme of the introductory course: What is religion—and who is to say? By the time we get to the theology section, they have learned to ask whose perspectives are admissible. Do not all perspectives come with cultural limitations as well as insights? And why, in an academic setting, is it appropriate to want more than private answers for these questions?

Most of the course introduces religion in terms of psychology, comparative mythology, ritual, and sociological change, all of which foreground the explicitly non-theological approaches that have become so dominant in the twentieth century. For students, like most people who think of religion as a matter of ideas about divine beings that one either believes or does not, these methods of social analysis are a surprise, almost unwelcome to some and too welcome to others. Yet they bring important experience. Though quickly appreciating the importance of family and communal rites, students also know that participation in such rites can be expected even when personal conviction regarding the values or beliefs espoused in the rites are lacking. They can imagine the performative act as religiously expressive, or simply socially effective. When they come to appreciate the extent of their own involvement in

civic rites, club rites, and college ceremonies, some students are a bit distressed: the knowledge undermines their own carefully measured sense of distance between themselves and organized religion of any sort, or they undermine the distinct religious identity they may have cultivated, since all these other innocuous rites engage them in communities that take their other, secondary identities as uppermost. For students with strong religious convictions, the distress is worse when religion is presented, at least in part, as a matter of social categories and ceremonial action, rather than religious convictions about primal revelations. Yet few reject the course material; they choose instead to work their way through it. And it is the ritual section that seems to convince them of the value and applicability, however limited, of the theories presented.

In one simple classroom exercise, the students must research and bring in a "posture" typical of the ritual life of a particular religious tradition—kneeling in prayerful supplication, receiving baptism in a river, standing to chant a specific invocation to each of the gods of the four corners, lighting incense to the ancestors, singing gospel hymns, praying on a prayer rug facing Mecca, or lighting the candle at sundown with a blessing that marks the beginning of the Sabbath. The students are usually very imaginative in seeking out the familiar and unfamiliar, researching it and coming to appreciate the beauty of the act. Moreover, the physicality of acting ritually in unusual ways seems to provide avenues for externalizing their questions and unease. The discussions have been very stimulating. And although the adoption of such postures can smack of high school or late-nineteenth-century forms of parlor entertainment, we also have the opportunity to discuss the artificiality of our actions in the classroom and the importance of context in understanding such activities. They are aware that conflicts over "whose tradition is it?" have arisen when the religious practices of one people are taken and used by others in very different contexts; this is most likely to be experienced as more than mere sacrilege when the people already feel victimized by other forms of cultural exploitation. Yet the pedagogical result, delivered very gradually and often incompletely, is the ability to understand and articulate the importance of activity itself, the often secondary nature of doctrinal formulations, and the mystery of personal religious experience in a context of cultural expectations and social models.

Religion in Full Context

The introductory course I designed focuses on some of the main topics and analytic categories used by historians of religion, all geared to emphasize how to employ and evaluate theories of religion (or anything else, of course). If the spectrum of ways to analyze religion dominates at the introductory level,

secondary courses focusing on specific traditions are opportunities to explore ritual acts in the very thick of another cultural and historical context. Though I have had to teach all of the Asian traditions at one time or another—and frequently in comparative courses using Christian, Jewish, or Muslim material—changes in the curriculum have gradually allowed more focus on my main areas of formal competence. In teaching Chinese religions or Buddhism in all its Asian (and some American) forms, there have been many opportunities to use ritual practices to explore religion as more than a pantheon of deities and a set of beliefs formulated to look like the other “world religions.”

In fact, it is impossible to teach Chinese religions as primarily a matter of beliefs with some rites attached. Though I do not draw students into the debates that have engaged me professionally, I do introduce them to the question “What is religion?” in the context of Chinese culture, and to the question of how much we should focus on ritual practices or the formulations, usually textual, of beliefs (and who might have held which ones). These issues throw into relief the problems that come with all the assumptions of even a vaguely Judeo-Christian background. Breaking out of the Christianity model of religion is necessary even to understand its siblings, Judaism and Islam. It is no less necessary on the other side of the globe. Ancestors and ancestor rites, a divinatory cosmos, the many meanings of “the way,” and centuries of interaction with very different ways of being Buddhist—in all these cases, rituals make the outlines of religious diversity become clearer, even when they are glossed by the perfect bit of textual imagery from Zhuangzi or Zhu Xi. Yet the many formulations of religiosity found in China challenge the imagination of anyone raised within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic paradigm, suggesting to them that either China is *really* different, or maybe we have a very simplified understanding of what has been going on behind the neat outline of our dominant paradigm.

In a modest variety of courses, I suggest that the cultural importance of ceremony in tribal as well as official court rituals around the globe arguably makes ritual a starting point for the project, however open-ended, of understanding religion. But the process is complicated by the realization that we cannot assume that ritual or religion are essentially the same sort of thing everywhere. So a course on the religions of China or Japan or a course covering Buddhism from India to California will often fall into the easier stance of surveying religious-like cultural history; it is a different sort of course when taught as an opportunity to question the nature of ritual and religion, challenging the basic ideas with which we engage that cultural history. Such courses, therefore, destabilize assumptions and neat definitions about what religion is. I certainly am thoroughly destabilized by now and know that a few students felt more than a bit challenged! One religion major declined to take

a required course with me for a couple of years, willingly telling me it worried him, until his senior year when he finally signed up for my course on Buddhism. He was a thoughtful Christian and had not wanted anything to disturb his beliefs. I recommended he talk it out with his Jesuit advisor, who was responsible for finally convincing him to enter the Buddhism course. He did not love the course, but by senior year he was mature enough to be interested and drawn into the comparisons with what he knew. Finally, unsure what to do a paper on, he picked up on a reference I made to the problem of involuntary losses of semen by Buddhist monks when sleeping, a topic that was much discussed for its problematic implications of a loss of physical control and lingering forms of sexual desire. The student did a fine paper, one that I quoted in class for years after. By coming to understand in greater depth Buddhist views of the body, and the ritual controls expected of it, he found some common ground on which to understand the differences and similarities of Buddhism and Christianity.

Over the years, a teacher works up a few extended examples, such as the Japanese imperial enthronement ceremony, stretching from what it known of its origins to the curious arrangements in the most recent one, that of Akihito. Chinese ancestor rites allow for multiple examples that contrast the formal Confucian canon with the irrepressible forms of folk religion. In developing small examples, different types of religiosity are encountered—village religion, the regional religions of market-linked towns, the religion of the cultured elite, and the ceremonial life of the court itself. In addition, there were the religious movements of charismatic leaders, which led to political campaigns, much suffering, and cultural changes. The more subtle logic of various Chinese rites of “self-cultivation” can be shown to play out in the history of Daoism, alongside stages in the sinification of Buddhism, the modernization of Confucianism, and even the “reeducation rites” of the Cultural Revolution at the hands of the Red Guards.

Students, of course, have a hard time figuring out how such materials will fit into the examination structure, although they do figure it out. Students know they may be at a disadvantage when they step into one of my classes if their only previous coursework addressed Christianity, but I think the disadvantage is quite different from what they imagine. It is not one of knowledge, but perspective. Christianity is the religious tradition least likely to be taught with reference to its key rituals. In most religious studies departments, undergraduate courses on Judaism and Islam naturally discuss some of the main ritual components of these traditions, often presented as more orthopraxic in orientation than Christianity. They also deal with the significance for a Jew or Muslim of the ideal of living a life defined by observing all of the ritual responsibilities laid out for a man and a woman. There are always classes celebrating a seder at Rosh Hashanah, or making visits to mosque

services, as David Pinault describes. Yet courses on Christian history or theology that refer to the liturgical expressions of key doctrinal ideas will do so without ever examining what these liturgical expressions mean to anyone but theologians.

We have all been *trained* to present religion as systems of ideas, which are primarily attested to by texts. Should we happen to study Confucianism or Islam, we would take for granted a bond between religion and culture that is broken only occasionally by various modern pressures to accommodate religious plurality and secular democracy. In other words, we learn about Confucian and Islamic cultures, noting the continuities and discontinuities between the textual bases and traditional ritual practices. Religion defines culture. Yet Christianity is presented as noncultural, undetermined by any cultural forces, even though it has resided on the same continent for most of its existence. If there are winds of change in the air, they come as departments of religion begin to see the need to pay greater attention to global Christianity. That involves the study of Christianity in a multitude of cultural translations, appropriations, or even defensive accommodations. Yet in view of the unarticulated relationship of Christianity to culture, teaching the globalization of Christianity could still defeat the issue: it might underscore the peculiarity that *our* religions are relatively distinct from culture; in other words, religion and culture are distinct at home, but joined when foreign. The inclusion of ritual would make it impossible to ignore this issue. Indeed the Christian churches of Sierra Leone include their culture primarily in their rituals and thereby present the Vatican or the Anglican communion with the need to express concern about such sources of disunity.

The study of ritual practices has had a second-class standing among religious studies faculty and has elicited zero interest among students who are looking for exotic knowledge and strange experiences. Although I have a rationale for not offering a course just on ritual to undergraduates, it is true that I fear no one would show. Introductory texts increasingly include a chapter on ritual, which is an improvement conceptually. But to my mind, such chapters tend to reinforce student perceptions that rites are boringly familiar when they are not incomprehensibly strange; for them, it's the ideas or the art or the history that interests. To amuse myself as much as anything, I have approached the ritual component of my introductory course as a personal challenge. Each time I teach it, there is the opportunity to understand better how rites relate to symbols, doctrinal revelations, textual interpretation, and the inevitable processes of social change—and how to teach these relations more effectively. It is a challenge to figure out how to present ritual not as a grand “theory of everything,” as Turner does, nor as just a chapter in a text on religion. My goal is to show the fundamental role it plays in integrating thought, action, and tradition, that is, in making a functional holism of the

most routine experiences of religion—a holism that is one of religion's most powerful attractions.

NOTE

1. This course is under development as an introductory textbook (tentative title, *What IS Religion?*) due out in 2009.

USEFUL MATERIALS

Books

Bell 1997 and 1998 and Turner 1969 may be particularly useful for readers who want to adopt recommendations made in this chapter. Also of special interest are the following:

- Cooke, Bernard, and Gary Macy. 2005. *Christian Symbol and Ritual: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grimes, Ronald, L., ed. 1996. *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Videos

- Altar of Fire*. 1976. Color. English text and narration. 58 min. Produced by Robert Gardner and Frits Staal. Berkeley: University of California, Extension Media Center. The only detailed film recording of one of the world's oldest rituals, the Agnicayana, a Vedic sacrifice to the fire god Agni. Like the other documentary films listed here, this video demonstrates the sheer complexity, tedious work, and variety of opinions that go into any performance of the tradition.
- The Funeral*. 1988. Produced and directed by Juzo Itami (Itami Productions). 123 min. Los Angeles, Calif.: Republic Pictures Home Video. A black comedy about an actress and her actor husband who, when her father dies, must be the chief mourners and observe the three-day traditional wake. They learn their "roles" from a video called "The ABCs of Funerals." Excellent satire on the cheap consumerism of modern Japan and the power of ritual to break through it now and then.
- The Japanese Tea Ceremony*. 1993. Color. English narration. 30 min. Produced by NHK, Japanese National Television. Princeton, N.J.: Films for the Humanities and Sciences. A particularly detailed account of all the preparations behind this supposedly simple ritual, accompanied by a discussion of the "way of tea" (*cha-no-yu*) that focuses rather exclusively on one significant seasonal tea ceremony as performed by the heir of the Omoto Sen-ke family, one of the leading schools of tea in Japan.
- Kuan Yin Pilgrimage*. 1988. 56 min. Produced by Prof. Chin-fang Yu. A documentary filmed in China that records the 1987 celebrations of the birthday of Kuan

Yin, a Buddhist ("goddess") bodhisattva, in the T'ien-chu monastery in Hangchow and on P'u-t'o Island, with discussion of pilgrimage practices to Buddhist monasteries there.

Puja: Expressions of Devotion. 1996. 20 min. Produced and distributed by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. A basic introduction to this ubiquitous form of Indian worship with a general overview that compares puja in the home and at the temple. A final, unnarrated section presents good footage of household Durga puja in western India and a Chandi puja in an outdoor shrine in Orissa state in eastern India.

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