

Rituals in Modern Life

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Human alone of all creatures live in a world of their own making--a world of symbols and rituals. Other creatures have simple languages and transmit learned behavior to their offspring. Only human create symbolic worlds that enable them to think of other worlds, and better worlds, and to reflect on their own worlds. Within these worlds, it is through sacred symbols and rituals that humans find their ultimate meanings, experience their deepest feelings and express their fundamental morality and allegiances.

In a modern world increasingly devoid of a sense of the transcendent, is there still a place for sacred rituals? There have always been secular individuals who are uninterested in religion. But modern secularism goes further Mircea Eliade writes,

Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses to appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself complete in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god (1959,203).

Questions of ultimate realities are covered over by a stress on the immediate. Solving today's problems and finding self-fulfillment replace a search for final meaning and salvation. Sports, entertainment and the search for ecstasy substitute for the deep inner peace that passes understanding.

In such a world, is there still a place for sacred symbols and rituals that speak of transcendence, mystery, ultimate meaning, and a God who is other than ourselves?

Symbols and the Sacred

We create our worlds within by means of symbols. These give expression to the three major dimensions of all experiences: the ideas that give meaning to the world around us, the feelings that are our responses to that world, and the values and allegiances that motivate and guide our actions.

Symbols operate on a number of different levels. We use ordinary words to deal with the everyday things of life; hum tunes, smile and gesture to vent our immediate feelings; and keep notes to remind us what we must do. On the other end of the spectrum, we use formality to express deeper sentiments. We dress up, observe intricate rules of etiquette and behave in highly predictable ways, and in so doing we give expression to and reinforce our beliefs about the deeper order of life. These polar types reflect a fundamental difference in the way we use symbols.

Discursive and nondiscursive symbols.

The symbols we use in everyday life are discursive. There is an immediate link between the symbols and the world of our experiences. We see a tree, image it in our mind and think of the word "tree". We see a girl running and we speak of "running". Discursive languages include sign languages, ordinary speech and highly technical languages such as mathematics and topology.

Nondiscursive symbols are harder to describe. They *point towards* things that we cannot express in ordinary words. They go beyond the limits of discursive language to speak indirectly about what Wittgenstein calls the "unspeakable." They refer to ideas, emotions and motivations

that transcend our immediate, mundane experiences. For example, a love poem using the words "sunshine" and "spring" about a young woman does not seek to inform us about meteorological data. Nor is it a passing expression of feelings about the day. Rather it communicates the intimate ideas, feelings and values of a young man's heart.

Music, for example, is a symbolic "language" not for communicating ordinary thought, but for expressing intimate feelings. Like any language, it must be learned. At first, Indian or Chinese music is not intelligible to us in the west. Other nondiscursive language include status symbols such as insignia, national symbols such as banners and anthems, and money. These stand for deeper, culturally determined orders in the world.

Nondiscursive symbols lose their meaning when reduced to ordinary language. Von Bertalanffy writes, "If the meaning of Goethe's Faust, or Van Gough's landscapes, or Bach's Art of the Fugue could be transmitted in discursive terms, their authors should and would not have bothered to write poems, paint or compose, but would rather have written scientific treatises (1981:52)."

Bracketing and the Sense of the Sacred

At the heart of nondiscursive symbols is analogy and metaphor. In speaking of things beyond ordinary language, we take ordinary symbols, such as words, and use them to point to something beyond themselves. Thus the Psalmist refers to the Word of God as a "light," a "lamp," a "law," and a "testimony" (Ps. 119). The prophets, speaking of God's time, talk about the "day of the Lord."

A problem arises when we use ordinary words and other symbols in both discursive and

nondiscursive ways. On what level are we talking? Should we take one another's meanings literally? Or are they pointing beyond themselves? One way to avoid the confusion is to "bracket" ordinary symbols when we want to use them in nondiscursive ways. When we use brackets or quotation marks in a sentence, we change the level of discourse. For example, if we say, "John said that he is going to town," we remain the speakers throughout. But if we say, "John said, 'I am going to town,'" the sentence moves from us as speakers to John as the speaker. There is a shift in the level of discourse.

Similarly, if we take ordinary symbols, such as a spoken sentence, and *bracket them*, we inform listeners not to take these symbols with their ordinary meaning. We are using the symbols to point to something beyond ordinary meanings, to something that cannot be fully expressed in words. For example, we use ordinary sentences in prayer, but in so doing, we speak *to* a transcendent God. Or we use bread and grape juice in the Lord's Supper, but in doing so we speak of the body and blood of Christ.

Sacred beliefs and experiences are basically nondiscursive in nature. They cannot be described in ordinary language. All we can do is to point in the direction they lie using a sacred language. This we create by bracketing ordinary symbols. We wear special clothing, go to special places at special times, and kneel, raise our hands or bow to show that what is happening is sacred. We sing, chant, and preach, using special words and tones of voice, to let everyone know they should not take this as ordinary talk. We use "Our Father" to mark the beginning of the bracket and "Amen" to mark the end in addressing God. We use repetition and liturgies. And we combine all these into sacred events or rituals.

Rituals as Sacred Drama

A ritual is a collection of symbols in an organized form. It is form of bracketing for it tells us not to take the symbols used in their ordinary sense. For example, in an ordinary ritual, we greet one another when we first meet in the day. We have a standard set of responses: "Hello -- Hello. How are you? -- Just fine, and you? O.K., things are hectic as usual -- They sure are. Nice seeing you. Yah, and you too. So long. -- So long." If we take these responses at face value, they often appear to be hypocritical. "How are you? -- Just fine." In fact, we are feeling terrible, our bank account is overdrawn, and we are caught in a tangle at work. Nevertheless, we say "Just fine!" The reason is that the ritual does not refer to our personal state of affairs. It speaks about the state of the relation between us. When we say, "Just fine," we are saying that the relationship between us is going well. We recognize and appreciate one another. This can be seen from the fact that when someone ignores us when they pass, we feel slighted. The relationship has somehow soured.

Sacred rituals speak of transcendent meanings, feelings and values. They express our sense of mystery in a world greater than our comprehension, and awe in the presence of God. They give reality to our worship and submission to God. They provide the deepest meanings to our lives by revealing to us the underlying order of reality, and by reminding us of the cosmic story within which we live.

Rituals restore order to the world

In order to live, we need some idea about the order of the world around us, a map of how

things are related to each other. Sacred rituals provide us with a sense of that order. Broadly speaking, they fall into two types which are sometimes referred to as *rites of intensification*, and *rites of transformation*.

Rites of intensification. Most of our sacred rites are cyclical--they are repeated at regular intervals. Their purpose is to remind us of the order we tend to forget in everyday living. In a sense, they are like cleaning house. Living at home creates disorder: we eat and the dishes must be washed, we sleep and beds must be made, we work and clothes must be washed. So we take time to restore the order in the home by cleaning up.

Similarly, in ordinary life we deal with a semi-chaotic world, and soil our lives with sin. In church on Sunday we gather to restore our awareness of God's divine order and to cleanse ourselves from sin. In other words, we "reintensify" what we already believe.

Rituals of intensification are characterized by a number of things. First, they are times of *high expectation*. We bracket ourselves away from the ordinary cares of life by going to a special place at a special time, by wearing different clothes, and by other symbolic separations from everyday life.

Second, they normally have a high degree of *order* to them. There may be printed bulletins, formal orders of services, specified songs and scriptures, and liturgies. Creeds, prayers and the Lord's Supper are repeated to give them greater meaning. In fact, much of what goes on in a normal Sunday morning service can be predicted before the service begins. In performing the ritual we reaffirm our beliefs.

Finally, these rites are characterized by a high sense of *community*. The participants have

clearly defined roles, such as pastor, choir member, lay person and usher which reflect the different functions necessary to carry on the service. Moreover, these roles are frequently marked by symbols such as clothing, behavior and location of the persons involved, and the ways in which they relate to each other. These roles constitute the normal social organization of the church. By enacting the ritual, we reinforce our social order.

Intensification rituals restore our sense of order. They make us 'feel at home' in our world and leave us with an intensified faith in the meaning of life as we have defined it in the ritual.

Rites of transformation Other sacred rituals help us to create a new order when the old order is no longer adequate. They are like remodeling a house. In order to do so, we must break down the old walls and tear up the floors. The immediate result is chaos, not order. But we endure it because we have faith that a new order will set in that is much better than the old. Sometimes we endure it because we have already begun to tear down the old, and can no longer go back. It is faith in a new order we see ahead that keeps us going, and as that new order emerges out of the dust and chaos of remodeling, our faith is confirmed. These rites of transformation include pilgrimages, retreats, evangelistic crusades, camps, and revival meetings. They also include rites associated with conversion, birth, marriage, graduation, retirement and death.

Like intensification rites, transformation rites involve a separation from ordinary life. Often, however, they involve going to a new place, hearing a new person (a prophet), and expecting something new. The emphasis is not on restoring an already established order, but on creating a new one. This emphasis on the new leads to what Victor Turner calls "liminality"--the

feeling of being in limbo, neither this nor that (1969). The old is gone, the new has not yet set in.

Liminality is reflected in the order of the service which is often highly unpredictable (although not always for the leaders). New songs are sung, there is no defined liturgy, and the unexpected takes place. The audience follows the instructions of the leaders.

Liminality is also reflected in the social roles. There is a sharp distinction between the leaders and the people, but among the people there is a social leveling that breaks down the normal roles of community life. On a pilgrimage or in a revival meeting, for example, ordinary social roles such as "doctor," "lawyer," and "construction workers" become meaningless. All stand equally as sinners before the foot of the Cross.

The power of transformation rituals is the anticipation and openness to the new that they create. At their best, they can transform a person or a society by giving them a new and vital vision and faith in one transforming experience.

Rituals as Sacred Story

On the synchronic level, rituals provide us with a sense of ultimate order. On the diachronic level, they make our lives meaningful by reminding us of our ultimate "story". In this sense, rituals are dramatic reenactments of the key cosmic events.

Eliade (1959) reminds us that there are three such stories: the cosmic story, the history of our people (our tribe, our group, our nation), and our own story (our biographies). The last of these clearly takes place within the second. Our story takes on meaning because it is a part of our group's story. But what is the relation of history to cosmology?

Eliade (1963) points out that in JudeoChristianity, human history is placed in the very

middle of cosmology. History emerges out of cosmology at creation, is shaped by the hand of God, and ends in a cosmic eschatology. Therefore, because cosmology has meaning, history, too, has meaning. And because history has meaning, human biographies have meaning. It is this this emphasis on its cosmic ties that makes history so important to Christians.

Eliade also argues, that modern humans have lost the sense of the transcendent, and of cosmic history. They are left with history as the big story. But does history without cosmology have meaning? Eliade notes that modern science is seeking to fill in the pieces in the puzzle of history with the hope that when all the pieces are in place, the whole will make sense. But, Eliade notes, it will not.

Sacred Rituals and Secular Humans

Can modern humans live in a world without transcendence? It appears not. For a time they can ignore ultimate questions of meaning and mystery by participating in the secular rituals of entertainment and sports. But as Sarte, Bertrand Russell and others have found, in the long run, human history torn from a cosmic framework becomes tragic and meaningless. Modern myths created for the movies, T.V., science fiction, and novels employ many sacred motifs--the fight between a superhuman hero and a monster, and conflicts between good and evil (Wink 1992). Marxism and capitalism both have within them an eschatological hope (Berger 1974). New Age and other modern forms of spirituality point to the fact that modern humans are starved for a sense of meaning rooted in transcendence (May 1991).

It is in this context that Christians need to reaffirm the central message of the Gospel by creating new and living sacred symbols and rituals. Too often we have continued with rituals

that once were living, but now have little meaning to modern humans. The answer to dead rituals is not **no** rituals, it is living rituals that give expression in our day to the transcendent realities of Christian faith. We too often examine faith as an academic exercise. We need to express in it living rituals in which we become participants in the acts and story of faith that is at the heart of good rituals. Through living, creative ritual we can affirm to the world that in Christ we find ultimate order and story--hence meaning; through Him we experience the deepest feelings of mystery and awe; and in Him we find our Lord.

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1995

Who is the Other?

We are facing a sea change in higher education. Behind us is the seas of western parochialism, ahead the ocean of global understanding.

The change is one of cognitive frameworks. Parochialism looks to itself and its local reference points. We from the west took our systems of knowledge to be universal, and gave little thought to systems of knowledge in other cultures. Globalism has a universal frame that encompasses all peoples, languages, cultures and religions. Missionaries have long faced the challenge of global diversity. Today, pastors and churches face it in the growing diversification of their neighborhoods and congregations.

Globalism is a new mind set. It seeks to develop mental frameworks that takes into account and tests all parochial systems of knowledge. An illustration of a shift from a parochial to a global frame took place in the U.S. in the 1860s. The early settlers used a system of survey called "metes-and-bounds." They marked their fields by local reference points-- the boundary of the field ran along the river until it met the stream, then up the stream to the large rock. . . In towns they laid their roads square to local features--to the river, railroad or old horse trail. Each locality had its own reference points and its own maps. There was no universal map to make travel between distant points easy.

After 1864, the global meridian system of longitudes and latitudes was introduced. The reference points were now the North and South poles, and the equator. Using these all points on earth could be mapped on one grid, travel between them became possible. This shift from local to global frames of reference is seen in U.S. cities such as Minneapolis, Minn., and Fresno, Calif. The first city blocks were laid "square" to the river or railroad. After 1865 they were laid

north/south. The result was a great deal of confusion where the two systems meet.

We face a similar shift in higher education. We must develop global mental frames that encompass western and nonwestern systems of knowledge. This is true in western science which must be seen as one among many sciences. It is true of religions and theologies which must deal with the diversity of human beliefs.

The easy solution to pluralism is to affirm all parochialisms as equally valid. This, however, leads us only to a destructive relativism. Moreover, it gives us no answer to global problems of population explosion, ecological destruction, sin and the lostness of humanity. The more difficult task is to develop global frames that enable us to understand and evaluate different parochial systems, and arrive at an understanding of global truth.

Globalism is also an attitude. We see this in the words westerners used when they described 'others' they encountered during the age of exploration. Robinson Crusoe is a classical description of one such an encounter as seen through the eyes of people of the Enlightenment. Crusoe sees Friday as a "savage" whom he must name and instruct. "Savages" are naked and he is clothed, they are uncivilized and he is civilized.

At the end of the Enlightenment, attitudes changed. The word 'civilization' was replaced by the word 'culture,' and nonwestern 'others' were no longer seen as barbaric 'savages,' but childlike 'primitives' who could be taught. According to evolutionists, they were biologically closer to animals, and their exotic cultures and strange practices were seen as prehistoric fossils of cultural evolution. For example, Marlow, the narrator in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1890), says regarding his first encounter with "primitives" in the jungle,

It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman. . . . They howled and leaped . . . but what . . . but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like

yours--the thought of your remote kinship.

Unfortunately, this attitude sometimes rubbed off on western Christians and missions.

In recent years the social sciences have been struggling to see the 'other' as fully human and equal to ourselves, only different. But this does not go far enough. Christianity provides us with the frame to be truly global in our attitudes. It shows us that in the church the 'other' is indeed 'us'. In Christ we are one new people, regardless of our ethnicity, class and gender. In the church, at the deepest level, there is no 'we' and 'they'. There is only **we** despite all our differences. It is one thing to know this in our heads. It is another thing for our attitudes to show this.

In the world, we share a common humanity with 'others' that is deeper than our differences. This is the basis of our love for the lost, and our desire to see them saved.

Finally, globalization must be a response in which our mental and attitudinal frame is manifest in the way we relate to others. It is our aim here at TEDS to help us all gain the global vision of the church and of humanity that God himself has as creator, savior and lord of all.

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