Riting the Life Cycle: Academic Approaches and Conceptual Considerations

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Introduction

In this short article, I would like to offer some reflections and commentary on various academic approaches to understanding the life cycle.[1] I would specifically like to consider what kinds of questions scholars can ask about the rites or rituals that mark the life cycle—questions that can perhaps help us see and feel afresh the shape and texture of otherwise familiar practices. What grounds PASR is its commitment to collegial scholarly inquiry, and that shared commitment necessarily includes openness to different methodological approaches and backgrounds: some members of PASR are theologians, some are sociologists or anthropologists, and some members are from disciplines in the humanities that focus on the learning of languages and the careful study of texts. I happen to be from a religious studies background, and have found that the way in which religious studies is understood varies depending upon the academic culture in which it is situated. And so, in the spirit of dialogue that PASR seeks to foster, I would like to share something from my academic background as a scholar of religion, trained in an American setting,

Religious Studies as a discipline embraces a variety of methods. Its origins can be traced to the work of Max Müller in the later part of the 19th century.[2] In wake of Europe's destructive religions wars and the scientific pivot marked by the Enlightenment, Müller sought not just to find the common ground of all religions but also develop a veritable science of religion that would encompass religion's diverse forms throughout culture and history. While contemporary scholars of religion have abandoned this search for some kind of shared historical origin of religions, there is consistent and sustained academic focus on shared themes in religion. Among these themes are the sacred--how it's manifested—as well as power, particularly how dynamics and relations of power shape religious structures and categories of religious expression.

One of the preeminent religious structure and categories is ritual, or rite. And it is in relation to the scholarly status of ritual that I orient this article by raising three questions: 1) what is a ritual or rite? 2) How does ritual or riting work? 3) what does it mean to ritualize or "rite" something in the life cycle? The title of this essay, "Riting the Life Cycle" signals--perhaps not very cleverly—the central concern

[1] This is an edited version of a paper that I delivered, with the same title, at the conference "From the Cradle to the Grave: Catholicism and Stages of Life in the Philippines," University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines, January 18, 2016. I would like to thank Dr. Esmeralda Sanchez and all those at Santo Tomas who made the conference possible.

[2] See Max Müller, *Natural Religion* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1907).

with considering academic approaches to ritual and exploring the conceptual considerations connected with them.

Ritual and Rite

Let us move to address the first question: What is a ritual or rite?

"Rite" as a noun comes from the Latin word "*ritus*" and is generally taken, in Catholic contexts for example, to mean any kind of organized religious observance: so prayers, ceremonies, and so forth, would fit the definition of "rite." But such a ready definition also leaves open crucial questions, such as what distinguishes a rite from other kinds of activity. For example, does "religious" content distinguish an action as "ritualistic?" Or is that characterization too narrow, given that many aspects of life are ritualized without an apparent or explicit religious referent.

Scholarly approaches to defining what a rite or what ritual is, can be traced to Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of contemporary sociology, a French scholar who wrote at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. In his massive work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim examines totemism, a form of Australian indigenous religion, and develops a definition of religion as follows:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.[3]

The practices related to sacred things—things that are set apart and forbidden—are rites, rituals. And so, initially Durkheim defines ritual as a special kind of action that is complementary to, yet different from, belief or thought. Belief and action are dichotomized, they're opposed while simultaneously remaining inextricably linked.

As action, what distinguishes a rite or ritual is that is it patterned: it has a structure; it is not random. More recently, however, in Western academic contexts, this focus on ritual as simply activity has been debated and challenged. And it has largely been challenged on the basis of making an artificial distinction between thought and action. If we reflect on our behavior as human beings, it is clear that when we act, we think, and thinking is a form of acting.

Most recent work on ritual studies has argued that what ritual or "riting" does is to fuse thought and action to create meaning. The key theorist here is Clifford Geertz, an American anthropologist associated with Princeton university.[4] For Geertz, religion is about meaning: simply put, religion, through it symbols, ideas and practices, gives meaning to life. That might seem to be a rather uncontroversial and obvious point, but Geertz does tease out his position in a variety of interesting and complex ways. Ritual, rite, "riting" makes religious claims real, it actualizes particular kinds of meanings and dispositions; it brings together thought and action in a holistic way. It is important to realize that there are many within the Western academy who would challenge Geertz's approach. But for the purposes of our discussion, when we inquire about what is ritual or a rite, we can perhaps make several tentative observations:

a) a ritual or a rite is a patterned action.

b) A ritual or rite is an action that is distinguished from "normal action" either by

[3] Émile Dukheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1954), 47.

[4] The most compact articulation of Geertz's interpretation of religion is in his essay, "Religion as a Cultural System." See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87-125.

repetition, its content or focus, or the space in which it takes place.

c) A ritual or rite brings together thought and action to create a sense of meaning and to create an emotional disposition.

Again, these are all debatable points—they can and should be further articulated or clarified, but they might be a helpful way to highlight a number of conceptual considerations.

If we accept, for the purposes of discussion, that ritualizing or riting has a distinct impact, it brings us to the second question: How does ritual or riting work?

I would like to discuss a fairly conventional example to probe how ritual or riting works: the ritualization of First Communion in the United States. In the United States, while there are variations from diocese to diocese, generally the experience of first communion is ritualized, or rited as follows. There is initial instruction covering the foundational elements of Eucharistic doctrine: that the communion host is indeed the body of Christ and should be treated reverentially. Depending on the particular parish, there is also instruction as to how to receive communion: either in the hand or on the tongue. Then there is the first confession that precedes the mass. The ritual culminates with a procession in which the first communicants come in together to receive the Eucharistic host. Generally, there is a customary first communion garb: white dresses for the girls and, at the very least, white shirt and tie for the boys. When I participated in this ceremony—now quite a long time ago—there was great attention paid to all of us performing the steps of the rite in unison, especially genuflecting or kneeling. I remember our adult leaders actually had a small drum that they would strike whenever we were supposed to kneel. Usually, the first communicants take communion as a group, though this is something that varies from parish to parish depending on the numbers. After mass, it is usually customary to have a party in which gifts are exchanged—in this the godparents have a particularly important role as gift givers.

There's nothing particularly striking about First Communion as a form of ritualization, but we can still unpack it in interesting ways to understand how ritualizing or riting something works. The first observation is that, obviously, First Communion involves both thought and action: there is instruction in addition to the act of receiving communion itself. And so, thought and action are not opposed but joined together—at least ideally. But I think what is also interesting is how this kind of ritualization or riting contributes to making a narrative or life story. The white clothes obviously recall baptism and ritualizing or riting a particular moment in life contribute to building a life-story of interconnected moments that are ritualized, and hence stand out in particular ways. On one level, what is going on is developing a narrative of one's life in the church, as a member of the body of Christ. But on another level, what is going on is inculcating certain emotional dispositions and fostering, as well as deepening, certain kinds of relationships.

In light of the foregoing, I would like to draw attention to is the significance of the body for how ritual works: not only how bodily posture is related to particular emotional dispositions—in this case reverence and submission represented by kneeling—but also how ritualization/riting connects bodies through particular transactions, such as gift giving. The "gift of Christ's body and blood" which connects us vertically with God, is mirrored or echoed in other forms of gifting giving that joins others horizontally. In this sense, both the actual ritual of communion and the celebrations that come afterwards are almost equally important and certainly connected. The rite of first communion

creates meaning by focusing upon the body and facilitating certain kinds of exchanges. To sum up, I would say that two aspects that are profitable to focus on are how ritual creates meaning a) through the body as a place where thought and action are joined and b) through certain kinds of exchanges that connect people.

And now onto the third question: what does it mean to rite or ritualize something in the life cycle?

When we think of the life cycle, it's common to think of specific life transitions that are universally shared birth, marriage, and death. But it's also important to recognize that different cultures will divide up or categorize the life cycle according to different registers. For example, in Jewish and Muslim cultures, circumcision is a part of the life cycle that is ritualized in very important ways that are different from the emphasis given to it in Christian influenced cultures. In India, where I lived and studied for four years, the first hair cutting ceremony is crucial in Hindu culture. So, thinking about how and why particular moments in the life cycle are marked is especially important.

But here I would like to give an example of how ritual or riting relates to death in what I think is a provocative way. I will not talk about funeral rites, but something that is generally common in other countries, but relatively new in the United States, roadside shrines marking traffic accident deaths. I live in the state of Massachusetts and, in a town that borders my home city Worcester, there is a roadside shrine. The shrine memorializes the death of Andrew Reese, a sixteen-year-old high school student, whose car crashed into a tree in December 2010. After Reese's death, friends and classmates immediately set up a shrine at the accident site. At the center is the tree that where the car impacted—the tree now has the letters A.S.R nailed into it. Surrounding this are various tokens that reflect Reese's life and interests: a sports jersey, stuffed animals, and balloons. I suppose we could say, that these are not only ways to remember the dead, but modes of exchange, to make offerings to the dead that reaffirm the connections made in life.

Matters became more complicated as the shrine started to grow. Neighbors and residents started to complain, saying that there were too many offerings and that gatherings around the tree were becoming a public nuisance. The matter was soon turned over to the local government of the municipality for adjudication since law prescribes that memorials can only remain for 30 days after a person's death. In this respect that we can see how ritual involves dynamics of power and authority, which is something that interests many contemporary scholars of religion.

Yet with the Andrew Reese memorial, we can also appreciate how ritualization, riting, is a form of commentary. I was considering the controversy over the shrine and thinking what better way to represent the destabilizing impact of the sudden accidental death of a young man than by creating a shrine that suddenly destabilizes an entire neighborhood. By establishing up a memorial and having improvised rituals around it, the friends and family of Alden Reese were not only identifying an aspect of the life cycle as particularly important, they were commenting on it. This leads us to ask, whenever we look at how a rite is conceptualized or conducted, what are people trying to say through ritualizing something in a particular way?

All of my foregoing discussion or observations can easily be challenged. For example, some scholars might ask whether ritual really has a comprehensible meaning.[5] Other scholars might point out that just as ritual or ritualization can succeed in bringing

[5] On this theme, see Frits Stall, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26 (1979): 2-22.

meaning, sometimes it can fail.[6] Still other scholars would draw attention to how standard rituals or celebrations can either be resisted or used for different purposes than intended. But what remains is that the pattern of ritualization, or riting, exists a central part of the way in which humans experience our life-journeys, as diverse and multi-faceted as they are.

*** This lecture was delivered during the 10th anniversary of the Philippine Association for the Sociology of Religion (PASR) at the HOLY NAME UNIVERSITY, Tagbilaran, Bohol, Philippines.**

[6] On when ritual fails, see Amy Hollywood, "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization," *History of Religions* (November 2002), 93-116.