

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 8: Functionalist Approaches to Ritual 1

* Earlier work touching on the social role of ritual, such as that of Robertson Smith, suggested “functionalist” theories that focus on how ritual affects the organization and workings of the social group

* Fustel de Coulanges (d. 1889): the ancestor cult in classical times influenced marriage, property, and inheritance practices

Early Theories of Social Solidarity:

* Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) effectively establishing religion as a social phenomenon:

- defining religion giving priority to its social instead of psychological dimensions
- emphasizes distinction between sacred and profane as root of all religion
- beliefs = representations of the nature of sacred things; rituals are “rules of conduct” governing behavior in their presence
- “God” or “the ancestors” = collectively projected representations of the social group itself
- religion = a set of practices by which people sacralize the social structure and community bonds: ensures communal identification
- rites/ceremonies = regular opportunities to assemble and project sacred community images
- rites/ceremonies arouse passionate intensity (“collective effervescence”) where individuals experience something larger than themselves
- emotional responses cause people to identify inner selves with this larger reality (the collective community in disguised form)
- “For Freud God is the father, for Durkheim God is society”

* Durkheim claimed earliest form of religion was totemism:

- analyzed Australian totemism, focusing on totemic emblem known as the *churinga*.
- it simultaneously symbolized sacred power, the tribal clan, and the essential clan identity shared with the totemic animal
- worshipping the *churinga* instills a passionate reaction, that of identification with the totem as a sacral representation of the clan itself

* Durkheim's approach contrasts with his contemporaries who, while emphasizing ethnographic fieldwork, located religion in the traditional psychological realm

* However, Durkheim's recourse to emotional "collective effervescence" remains rather psychological. Yet he does not fall into the trap of rooting this in individual mental or emotional states, but relates each to the social

* Durkheim saw ritual as the means by which individuals are brought together as a collective group

* Traditional distinctions between God above and the soul within, or between body and soul, to Durkheim, are none other than the individual and society, one of whom exercises pre-eminence over the other. These are instilled in us through periodic rituals

* Durkheim saw religion as the medium through which shared social life is experienced. Yet, in his day, it was giving way to science and, he speculated, civic rites

* Some have criticized Durkheim for his all-encompassing claim that society is the source of all religion, morality, and knowledge

* Max Gluckman: it is necessary to consider conflict: other social forces

may also be at work

* Marcel Mauss (d. 1950) focused on studying the links between religion and other aspects of society (e.g. classification systems, sacrifice, gift exchange)

* Mauss and Hubert: Vedic ritual sacrifice in India: the structure of the ritual, not just collective effervescence, is key to its social function: sacrilization and desacrilization

Functionalism:

* Durkheim influenced the emergence of the functionalist school of British anthropology

* A.R. Radcliffe-Brown sought a more systematic correlation between religious ideas and social structure. Set out an ahistorical focus on social structure as the main determinant of religion and ritual:

- emphasized ritual in securing and maintaining group unity
- belief is the effect of the rite
- critical of Durkheim's "collective effervescence"
- ritual created mental states, it did not merely express them
- this dependence lies at the heart of the unifying power of ritual for society

* Malinowski, while often lumped in with Radcliffe-Brown as a functionalist, contrasts with him as:

- he emphasized individual experience as the root of religion
- focused on individual thinking processes, flexible personal interactions and pragmatic activities
- he felt some rituals had social functions; others did not

* All such writers, however, abandoned evolutionary and diffusionist

approaches in favor of study, through intensive fieldwork, of how a society operates

* This tended to:

- emphasize a closed system powered by an internal dynamism
- make little appeal to history or ideas and practices borrowed from elsewhere
- emphasize a static, structured system of social relations
- draw upon mechanical and organic imagery
- see ritual as a means to regulate and stabilize the life of this system