

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 6: The Phenomenological Approach to Ritual

While the myth and ritual school was primarily rooted in a British intellectual tradition, the approach to ritual that we will discuss today was rooted in continental Europe: a non-theological and nonphilosophical approach translated as the “science of religion” or “phenomenology of religion.” While fairly diverse, it has certain common threads: (1) a central focus on myth (as opposed to ritual) along with a stress on systematic comparison in understanding religion; and (2) a negative reaction to what it saw as the “reductionism” of the previous schools we have studied in favor of the view that myths are themselves a form of understanding. Indeed, the emphasis is placed on religious experiences as real and irreducible phenomenon and scholars are urged to explore the components of such as experiences as “the holy,” as something “wholly other”; and (3) a repudiation of most attempts to determine the historical origins of religion and backing away from an evolutionary framework to explain the differences among religions. Unless one recognized the “transhistorical sacred,” a purely historical approach is seen as reductionism: it does not tell us what a religious experience ultimately is. Ultimately, then, the phenomenologist’s stress on the ahistorical aspects of religion is accompanied by the attempt to develop a sophisticated method of comparison by mapping religious phenomena in terms of what is assumed to be underlying experiential patterns or structures.

Gerardus van der Leeuw (d.1950) and Raffaele Pettazoni (d.1959) tried to make this approach more systematic by identifying two formal components of religion: (1) the common structural elements underlying all religious experience; and (2) the actual, particular forms that these structures have in reality. Comparative research among the various forms of religion in relation to the latter would enable the enumeration of the former (i.e. the structural commonalities underlying multiple historical forms of religious experience). There was some confusion, however, as to whether these common experiential structures had some kind of independent existence (“The Sacred”) or were merely cognitive forms of the religious human mind. Under the latter view, the sacred is merely an element in the human structure of consciousness, not a transcendent divine reality or a stage in the history of human consciousness. Thus, while the myth and ritual school were talking about a single evolutionary-historical pattern that diffused to become the underlying basis for all ritual, myth, and other cultural development, the phenomenologists were trying to identify a more complex set of ahistorical universals (either the sacred out there somewhere or within human consciousness). This search for ahistorical universals enabled the phenomenologists to abandon the worst excesses of evolutionism, but often at the cost of a truly historical framework.

A major effect of this approach was to minimize the importance of ritual, although certainly not to dismiss it. Mircea Eliade (d. 1986), by far the most famous exponent of the phenomenological study of religion, gave a distinct primacy to religious myths over rituals. While he did so on methodological grounds - that myths and symbols provide a clearer and more spontaneous view of the various forms in which humans experience and express the sacred than is afforded by ritual - he was also apt to attribute a greater primacy to myths and symbols. To him, ritual is treated as a somewhat secondary reworking of mythic symbols, something that

cannot reveal what the symbol does. Thus, unlike the myth and ritual school that saw ritual as relatively stable and myth more likely to change, phenomenologists have tended to see far more stability in the structures underlying myth.

Eliade's position embraces the view that earlier forms of reasoning should not be dismissed out of hand as misguided, but analyzed for what they reveal about human perception and cognition. He also felt that the myth (often accompanying ritual) tells a sacred story about the nature of the gods and thereby explains how things came to be the way they are, how reality emerged, and providing an exemplary model for all significant human activities. Myth explains by reference to cosmic creation and symbols that express awe and tremendum, an encounter with the sacred.

For Eliade, the identification of human acts with the divine models preserved in myths enables people to experience what is real and meaningful, to regenerate cyclical notions of time, and to renew the prosperity and fecundity of the community. Ritual sets up the beginnings of this identification by re-enactment of the deeds performed by the gods in the primordial past and preserved in mythological accounts. By performing these deeds again in ritual, participants identify the historical here and now with the sacred primordial period of the gods before time began. Through this, people come to consider themselves fully human, sanctify the world, and render meaningful the activities of their lives. Thus, night-time agricultural rites of seed sowing by nude women accompanied by carnivalesque activities are not rooted in "primitive" beliefs that the forces of the sacred must be seasonally regenerated, but in the fact that these acts specifically repeat the mythical activities that created the cosmos: "the ritual makes creation all over again."

In sum, for Eliade, ritual is a re-enactment of a cosmogonic event or story recounted in myth. The myth plays a critical role in establishing the system in which any activity has meaning by ritually identifying the activities of the here and now with those of the gods in the period of creation. Thus we might conclude that the ritual is dependent on the myth, since it is the story that assures people that what they are doing in the ritual is what was done in the primordial age: "Thus the gods did; thus men do." Yet, Eliade accepts that in traditional societies the myth is never separated from the rite. Hence, in the final analysis, it would seem that Eliade did not think it possible to separate "living" myth from ritual; when such separation exists, myth is no longer myth - it becomes literature or art. Still, Eliade's approach does tend to put ritual on a secondary level, reserving a primary place for myth by virtue of its closer relationship to the underlying structures of all religious experience. Perhaps myth, as a matter of beliefs, symbols, and ideas, is deemed a manifestation of the sacred that is inherently closer to the cognitive patterns that define *homo religiosus*, while ritual as action, is considered a secondary expression of those very beliefs, symbols, and ideas.

These traditional emphases of the phenomenological approach have been both affirmed and modified in the work of Jonathan Z. Smith. In critical re-readings of classic studies of religious ritual and practice, Smith has pointed to how historically specific rituals attempt to create broad patterns of order and meaning. This includes an emphasis on the situational as much as the substantive aspects of ritual. For Smith, ritual portrays the idealized way that things in the world should be organized, although participants are very aware that real life keeps threatening

to collapse into chaos and meaninglessness. Ritual, he suggests, is an opportunity to reflect on the disjuncture between what is and what ought to be; it is a “focusing lens” through which people can try to see, or argue for, what is significant in real life.

Through Smith’s influence, phenomenology has come to see religion as central to the cognitive need to understand, explain, order, and adapt. This approach is in keeping with most theorists who have pondered myth and ritual. Whether among hunter-gatherers or modern peoples, religion is essentially a human project to formulate stable and meaningful dimensions behind the accidental, chaotic, and shifting realities of human existence. Phenomenologists have described this project differently, and chosen to locate “the sacred” in very different ways - in mystical confusion, transhistorical commonalities, cognitive structures, or human interpretive endeavors. Yet the results are similar: myths and rituals are seen as attempting to present, model, and instill a coherent and systematic unity within all human experience. Indeed, they are the means by which people keep forging some sense of the unity of human experience. For this reason, phenomenologists have stressed that religious phenomena must be understood “in their own point of reference” ; they cannot be reduced to “infantile trauma, glandular accident, or economic, social, or political situations.” Ultimately, phenomenologists conclude that the same principle of unification that lies behind the practice of religion must also underlie the study of religion: the meaning of religious symbolism as an integrated, coherent unity and the interpretive work of historians of religion as an integration of the various religious phenomena form a single and consistent correlation.

Micrea Eliade: Ritual and Myth:

At this point, now that we have introduced the phenomenological approach, we turn to your reading for today - and extract from Eliade where he focuses on the symbolism of the centre. The center represents a variety of things at one and the same time: the world axis, the place at which earth contacts heaven and hell, the place where the world began, etc. He presents examples of sacred mountains, temples, palaces and cities, showing how each is connected with creation, cosmic orientation or the gods. The center is, in his terms, “the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality.”

Eliade argues that creation, the gods, and absolute reality serve as models for human action. Ritual amounts to a repetition of the acts of the gods. Eliade says that “every ritual has a divine model, an archetype.” Thus every rite is a symbolic return to the time and place of the origin. Every rite takes place in the beginning. Through ritual, human beings realize what is real and meaningful. As narrative accounts of the acts of creation, myths often serve as models for ritual.