

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 8: Functionalist Approaches to Ritual 1

Earlier work on ritual, while engaged in questions concerning the origin of religion, also bore the seeds of further questions - questions less concerned with the historical or psychological sources of ritual than with its role and purpose in society (i.e. its social function). Such “functionalist” theories are all concerned with what ritual accomplishes as a social phenomenon, specifically, how it affects the organization and workings of the social group. This thrust did not lead scholars to ignore the insights and contributions of their predecessors, nor even to abandon the search for the most “primitive” forms of religion. Yet It did enable them to challenge the limits inherent in earlier theories.

While functionalism did not fully materialize until the works of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, several early scholars contributed by emphasizing the importance of ethnographic fieldwork, the pragmatic social uses of religion, and the structural links between religion and various forms of political and social organization. Thus Fustel de Coulanges (d.1889) argued the importance of studying a culture’s earliest beliefs to understand its institutions, and his idea that the ancestor cult maintained joint family lineage as the central social institution in Greece and Rome helped explain how a vast array of classical rites and customs functioned socially - from marriage ceremonies to property and inheritance practices. Both Fustel and Robertson Smith influenced the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim (d.1917).

Early Theories of Social Solidarity:

In his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim effectively established religion as a social phenomenon (“social fact”). He defined religion in a way that gives priority to its social rather than its psychological dimensions: “religion contains in itself from the very beginning, even in an indistinct state, all the elements which...have given rise to the various manifestations of collective life.” Indeed, what went on in an individual’s individual psyche is not the starting point of religion, since religion is first and foremost a way of socially organizing groups of individuals. While psychologists would continue to emphasize individual experience, Durkheim formulated a coherent sociological approach that focused on religion as a matter of social institutions.

Basic to Durkheim’s approach was a distinction between the sacred and the profane that he saw as being at the root of all religion. “All known religious beliefs...present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by...the words profane and sacred.” He argued that religious beliefs are representations expressing the nature of sacred things, while rituals are “rules of conduct” governing how people should act in the presence of sacred objects. Developing Robertson Smith, Durkheim concluded that such ideas as the sacred as God or the ancestors, which are so central to religious worship, are none other than collectively projected representations of the social group itself. As a social phenomenon, religion is a set of practices by which people sacralize the social structure and bonds of the community. In this way, religion

functions to ensure the unconscious priority of communal identification.

Durkheim reasoned that rites and ceremonies play a key role in how religion does this. As regular opportunities for the social group to assemble itself and project sacred images that actually represent the community, rituals are designed to arouse a passionate intensity, feelings of “effervescence,” in which individuals experience something larger than themselves. Such emotional responses cause people to identify their innermost selves with this sense of a larger reality, what is, in effect, the collective community in disguised form. Durkheim’s development of a socio-psychic mechanism of projection was echoed by Freud, who modified the argument to suggest that God is a projection of the familial role of father: “For Freud God is the father, for Durkheim God is society.”

Durkheim, like his predecessors, claimed that the earliest form of religion was totemism as exemplified by the aboriginal tribes of central Australia. In his analysis of Australian totemism, Durkheim tried to demonstrate his social theory of religion and ritual by showing that the totemic animal is not as sacred as the totemic emblem. The emblem, carved on a piece of wood or stone called a *churinga*, simultaneously symbolizes sacred power, the tribal clan itself, and the essential identity shared by the clan and the totemic animal. While the tribes did not eat the animal in the manner reconstructed by Robertson Smith, neither do they worship the animal itself. Ceremonially, they worship the *churinga* in order to instill a passionate reaction to this pictorial dimension of the totem as a sacral representation of the clan itself. Although later ethnographic research has challenged Durkheim’s analysis of Australian totemic rites, his insights into the social nature of religion and ritual has endured.

Durkheim’s attempt to forge a truly sociological approach contrasts with the work of his contemporaries Robert Lowie (d.1957), Paul Radin (d.1959), and Bronislaw Malinowski (d.1942). While these three placed great emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork, they located religion in the traditional psychological realm - personal feelings like reverential awe, exhilaration, or fearful anxiety - not in any specific social actions. Indeed, despite his attempts to stay focused on “social” phenomenon, one problem in Durkheim’s sociology is his own recourse to rather psychological descriptions of effervescence as the key experience at the heart of ritual. Nevertheless, he described religion as a matter of social images and behaviors that mold the dispositions of the individual. Unlike the others, he did not derive the data of religion from the mental or emotional states of individuals or derive ritual from the expressive outflow of such individual mental and emotional states. Durkheim clearly saw ritual as the means by which individuals are brought together as a collective group. Ritual functions to “strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member”; it does so not by means of a conscious act of affiliation but the *experience* of the collective representation as a simultaneously transcendent and immanent commonality - God above and the soul within. The result, for Durkheim, is that the person is actually made up of “two beings facing in different and almost contrary directions, one of whom exercises a real pre-eminence over the other. Such is the profound meaning of the antithesis which all men have more or less clearly conceived between the body and the soul, the material and spiritual beings who coexist within us.” Periodic rituals reanimate people’s experiences of these two selves, the sacred and the profane selves, shaping their perceptions of the nature of the divine and the human, and embedding these perceptions and experiences in their sense of community and self.

While Durkheim's study of the elementary forms of religion was still caught up in the search for the origins of religion, he still opened up what would be an ahistorical, sociological approach to religion as a functioning system of social relations. He suggested that religion is a universal and indispensable dimension of social life since it is the medium through which shared social life is experienced, expressed and legitimated. Yet he also believed that, in his day, science was gradually asserting itself over religion as the dominant cognitive means by which people make sense of many aspects of life. He speculated that religion would continue to be important for purposes of social solidarity, but would serve this function in ever more social forms, such as civic rites in commemoration of national events.

The strength of Durkheim's insight into the social functions and determinisms of religion led to what has been called the flaw in his theory: its monolithic conclusion that society is the unique and all-encompassing source and origin of religion, morality, and even knowledge. Durkheim's definition of religion in terms of society and of society in terms of religion implies a unity too often undermined by the dynamics of real social groups. Max Gluckman, for example, pointed out that members of the congregation peaceably assembled in religious unity at a ritual are readily enemies in other social situations. Clearly, there are other social forces that must be taken into account. All the same, Durkheim's sociological approach would stimulate many more insights into both religion and ritual, informing broader social issues such as the social construction of perception and knowledge.

Marcel Mauss (d.1950), one of Durkheim's students, also stressed the importance of studying religion as a "total social phenomenon," but in using the word "total" meant something less reductive than Durkheim. For Mauss, to study religion as a total social phenomenon meant that it must be analyzed in terms of how it is linked to every aspect of society. Thus, he held that religion is eminently social, but religion and society cannot be collapsed together as mutually defining. Instead, Mauss explored the interrelationship of social life, religion, and cultural ideas in a succession of studies of classification systems, sacrifice, and gift exchange, collaborating with Durkheim, for example, in a 1903 study of how cultural categories of classification and knowledge are "modeled on the closest and most fundamental form of social organization."

In an earlier study of the ancient Vedic tradition of ritual sacrifice in India, Mauss and Henri Hubert described how it is the very structure of the ritual, not simply the experience of effervescence it generates, that is intrinsic to how the rite functions socially. They also rejected historical in favor of a structural-functional analysis of the total Vedic sacrificial system. Rather than seeing this as a gift or bribe to the gods, Mauss and Hubert pointed to two general processes inherent in all forms of sacrifice, sacrilization and desacrilization: (1) an essentially profane offering is made sacred - consecrated, in effect - in order to act as a means of communication and communion between the sacred and profane worlds; and (2) at the conclusion of the rite, a process of desacrilization re-establishes the necessary distinctions between these two worlds that make up day-to-day reality. In a modified Durkheimian fashion, they conclude that sacrifice is "an act of abnegation" by which the individual recalls the presence of collective forces even as those forces are channeled to work to the advantage of those individuals involved in the sacrifice. They also suggested that this sacrificial process functions to re-establish social equilibrium after it has been upset. Hence, while Vedic sacrifices are invoked by those who hire the priests, supply

the offerings, and make known specific concerns and requests to the gods, the activities and theological ideas of the ritual are rooted in assumptions that ascribe a divine nature to essentially “social matters and collective forces.”

Functionalism:

Durkheim’s focus on the social purposes of ritual developed into a general school among British anthropologists, particularly under the guidance of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (d.1955). He extended the sociological aspects of Durkheim’s interpretation of ritual and religion in several ways. He sought a more systematic correlation between religious ideas and social structure, theorizing that if the image of God is a collective representation or projection of the social group, then different forms of social organization will have different self-reflective notions of God. Although this simple correlation proved impossible to observe or show in practice, it effectively ignored and eliminated the evolutionary traces in Durkheim’s approach and did away with older questions about the origin of religion. Instead, Radcliffe-Brown set out an ahistorical focus on social structure as the main determinant of religion and ritual. Indeed, his stress on social organization and social function this led to criticisms that his functionalism unduly dismissed history. Yet for him, religion had to be approached as “an essential part of the social machinery” by which human beings live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations: “We deal not with the origins but with the social functions of religions, i.e., the contribution they make to the formation and maintenance of the social order.”

This emphasis on the immediate social determinants of religion also resulted from growing firsthand involvement in fieldwork. While Durkheim drew on written accounts (often prepared by missionaries), Radcliffe-Brown went to live in western Australia and later among the Andaman Islanders. While not as intensive as later fieldwork guides would encourage, his immediate experience among contemporary tribal societies simultaneously helped develop the sophistication of social anthropology and diminish the importance of historical analysis, especially with regard to oral societies without formal historical records.

This more developed social perspective led Radcliffe-Brown to reject the Durkheimian view of ritual as the means for expressing collective representations in the guise of religious beliefs. Instead, more like Robertson Smith, he prioritized ritual and its social importance in securing and maintaining the unity of the group. He argued that belief is the effect of rite, that action determines belief. While acknowledging that cause-effect arguments misrepresent how rites and beliefs are part of a coherent whole, his formulation of social functionalism focused on what he took to be the more enduring activities of ritual life as opposed to less stable doctrines and beliefs.

Radcliffe-Brown’s position made him somewhat critical of theories that stress ritual sentiment, such as found in some aspects of Durkheim’s work (e.g. “Effervescence”). Durkheim saw orderly social life as dependent upon the presence in each member’s mind of certain sentiments, such as solidarity, goodwill, love, and hate, which control each person’s behavior. Durkheim also argued that rites are “regulated symbolic expressions” of those sentiments that “maintain and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which this order are based.” Indeed, Malinowski put even more stress on individual emotional states by arguing that

some rituals (e.g. magical, as opposed to religious ones) have the practical effect of alleviating anxiety, distress, fear, doubt and sorrow. Yet it was clear to Radcliffe-Brown that rites can also create anxiety, not simply relieve it (e.g. strict ritual injunctions that things be done just-so). He rejected the assumption that ritual is a means to express, affirm or alleviate the intensity of prior mental states. Instead, he saw ritual as creating mental states, not simply expressing them. In particular, he argued, ritual simultaneously expresses and creates the sentiment of dependence on a type of moral or spiritual power that is thought to transcend the realm of the human. It is this sentiment that lies at the heart of the unifying function of religious rituals and makes such rites essential to the constitution of society: "I suggest to you that what makes and keeps man a social animal is not some herd instinct, but the sense of dependence in the innumerable forms that it takes." By focusing on experiences of social dependence, Radcliffe-Brown tried to formulate a more purely "social" understanding than that afforded by Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence or Malinowski's focus on individual anxiety.

The functionalist approach is usually credited to both Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, with acknowledged debt to Durkheim. Yet the two former have often been contrasted as thesis and antithesis. While Radcliffe-Brown developed Durkheim's stress on the social group, Malinowski rejected this view of religion as a social phenomenon and promoted the idea that it is rooted in individual experience, particularly the fear of death. Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the rules governing the structural organization of social relations; Malinowski individual thinking processes, the flexibility of personal interactions, and the pragmatic activities of real people. Malinowski did grant that some public rituals had social functions but others did not. In fact, he tended to define magical rituals as those that had the social function of relieving anxiety, while religious rituals were those that had no such social purpose and were simply a form of communication with the gods. Yet Malinowski was very aware of initiating a "functionalist revolution" by virtue of his abandonment of evolutionary and diffusionist approaches in favor of analysis, based in intensive fieldwork, of how a society operates. For Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and those they influenced, the functionalist approach tended to conceive of a culture as a closed system of social relations powered by an internal dynamism. This contrasts with the more comparative approach of the myth-ritualists noted before, for whom a culture tended to be a "patchwork" of transmitted or absorbed traits. A functionalist interpretation of a social phenomenon made little if any appeal either to history or to ideas and practices borrowed from elsewhere: society was seen as a static, structured system of social relations. Such a view lent itself to two popular metaphors for social phenomena: the organic and the mechanical. Radcliffe-Brown invoked the former when he suggested that each custom and belief plays a particular role in the social life of a "primitive" community in the same way that "every organ of a living body plays some part in the general life of the organism." This integrated "mass of institutions, customs and beliefs forms a single whole or system that determines the life of the society," which is as real a thing as the life of an organism. For social functionalists, therefore, ritual is a means to regulate and stabilize the life of this system, adjust its internal interactions, maintain its group ethos, and restore a state of harmony after any disturbance. As such, religion and ritual are social mechanisms with a particularly vital role to play in maintaining the system. While there has been significant criticism of various aspects of this functionalist theory, many readily accepted the view that functionalism provided at least a partial explanation of what ritual does and how society operates.