Ritual for Radicals:
Does Progressive Christianity need Ritual?
Some Notes & Questions

Lecture 1 – Ritual Power

Making sense of the world requires at least the complementary interaction of our symbolic mind and our rational mind, especially when that rational mind seems confused or has ground to a halt in its logical processing. Different forms of information processes are involved in this.

What of ritual, is it a language-like code ever ready to be decoded and 'understood'?

Some say that the success of any aspect of life depends upon the 'tension of consciousness' people bring to it, whether in cooking, getting to sleep, timetable planning, love-making, gardening, checking in at an airport, getting to church, entering into the service, leaving church etc.

Does ritual-time allow our tension of consciousness some free rein in creativity, with 'performance' as the medium of being of embodied persons?

Intensification and social force

All of life involves 'learning': sometimes this process is intensified, not least in ritual events.

Rites of passage are familiar, but what of 'rites of intensification,' periodic acts that focus our thoughts and trigger our emotions: these factors are intensified, brought to focus, rehearsed. We are reminded who we are and what we are.

A wedding may be a rite of passage for some at the event and of intensification for others; how so?

Some questions for group discussion

Q1   Is ritual 'like a language or not?'

Q2   How might Christmas at large be a widespread rite of cultural intensification?

Q3   What of the 'invention of tradition' in a ritual sense – how might ritual acts involving cremated remains, or wedding rings for the divorced or widowed, be instructive here?

Lecture 2 – Ritual Satisfaction

The term 'radical' seems to hint at an emphasis upon rationality and down play emotions. But emotions are unavoidable, so what emotions does a radical group entertain or favour and then, perhaps, seek to induce and manage?

William James asked how philosophers know when they have the right answer to some quandary? His response is: when they shift from a 'state of puzzle and perplexity' to a 'rational comprehension' that is 'full of lively relief and pleasure' typified by 'a strong feeling of ease, peace, and rest.'

Gordon Allport once said of some religious participants that 'As time goes on, the specific content of a religious service means less to them, while the service as a whole means more.'

The people and places in and through which we engage in ritual acts offer us some kind of affinity. In this context, the technical term 'elective affinity' links with the notion of 'charisma' in sociological terms to pinpoint our attraction to persons, places, or things.

A single ritual act may attract people for different reasons. My own notion of 'dual-purpose ritual,' for example, hints at the priest having one goal and the people another in a particular rite.

Rituals, like doctrine, are of many forms. We may learn it formally, pick it up or have it thrust upon us. Harvey Whitehouse argued for a distinction between 'doctrinal' religion (learned in 'class-like' contexts) and 'imagistic' religion ('learned' through trauma). Might this also relate to ritual in Christian contexts?

Some questions for group discussion

Q1 What have been your ritual affinities? Have they changed with time?

Q2 Have you had revelatory moments during ritual events? Alternatively, 'Lost in wonder, love, and praise' – what am I doing when singing such lines?

Q3 Choose one of these as a motif of spirituality that might be potentially integrative of your life-view,or propose some other.

   a. 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me (a sinner).'
   b. Giving thanks at all times and in all places.

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Some references for future reading.

Douglas Davies (2002) *Anthropology and Theology*. Oxford: Berg.
Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (2004) *Ritual and Memory*. Oxford: Altamira Press.
Turner, Victor. (1969) *The Ritual Process*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

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