Introduction: the lure and danger of ritual

> "Each generation must inevitably play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind." Carl Becker
>
> "[History] is a kind of respect for the dead." Carlo Ginzburg

When I was sixteen, I became a priest in the lay hierarchy of the Mormon church. One of our tasks as teenage priests was to read a prayer from a little card that blessed *the* sacrament, a bloodless vestige of the ancient Eucharistic rites by which Catholic priests had changed the substance of bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ. For us there were only homely pieces of white sandwich bread and small paper cups of water, which we had been taught were nothing more than *reminders* of Christ's last supper with his apostles.

Usually three of us sat at the sacrament table, and when our moment in the service arrived, we stood up, and the two of us at the ends of the table lifted a white cloth that had covered stainless-steel trays (no silver or gold for us) of bread and water. As the two of us faced each other, we tried to communicate with little clandestine gestures how we were going to fold the large cloth and who would hold the corners while the other reached down to make the final crease. This simple process seemed immensely solemn to us. We were concerned to make the folds neatly and never to drop the cloth, because we were intensely aware of the gaze, not of God so much as of the congregation. We were quite unlike young man Luther stumbling over the words of his first mass in dread of his human and divine fathers. We were boys trying to impress the girls.

It has been decades since I performed this simple activity, but I retain a persistent feeling of awe, less about the meaning of the ceremony than about folding that large cloth. One might call this feeling the "fear of the sacred." I have wondered where the fear comes from, and I suspect that it is a product of the gaze, the voyeurism of the congregation, intensified by sensual memories of other sheet-like foldings and prolonged gazes going back to early childhood, by long histories of commonplace actions performed under watchful eyes until they are no longer common but so

exquisite, so appropriate to the moment, so precise in their details that they become precarious to execute. They have become a ritual.

Although words may often be affixed to the ritual, like those completely forgotten sentences we read so many times off a little card, the awe seems to spring from the appeal to the senses rather than from an understanding of the text. Rituals give access to emotional states that resist expression in language, which is why they have become so desired and yet distrusted in our logo-centric culture. The repetition of everyday gestures within the confines of a special place and time rouses emotional responses – of fear or joy, hate or love, alienation or communion. In that emotional evocation lies the work of the ritual. As Ernst Cassirer put it, to share in a ritual performance means to live "a life of emotion, not of thoughts."[1]

Both the gazed upon and the gazers participate in the creation of a ritual, but sight is not the only sense enlisted in the performance. The feeling I experienced in folding the sacramental cloth also came from the sense of touch, the odd sensual pleasure of crisp, clean cloth skimming the skin. Other times the feeling came from pure sound, the congregation singing "Come, Come Ye Saints" or "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," the melodies of which seem to have outlasted the verses in my memory.

What is a ritual?

Precisely because rituals conjure emotional responses, they are extremely difficult to define. They exist in the transience of the moment, and when they fail to summon the expected response, they are empty, dead, "mere rituals." Recognizing their stunning power, religious and political authorities strive to create them, manipulate them, embellish them, regulate them, even abolish them, without ever quite succeeding to do any of these things because authority can never fully blot out the gaze or glove the touch. A satisfactory definition of the word "ritual" must take account to this process of emotional evocation.

My remembered emotion, however, only accounts for a fragment of the ritual experience. The folded sacramental cloth may have only derived its affective force from repetition in a compulsive return to a defining moment of pleasure or pain. Repetitions can create order out of chaos, but rituals seem to involve more than just repetition. The neurologist Oliver Sacks discussed an amnesiac patient who, lacking the cohesion of memory, held himself together by attending mass or listening to music.

[1] Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 24 as quoted in David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 67.

Sacks hypothesized that it was precisely the organic unity of these recitations, in which each part led to another, that produced the salutary effect: "such structures cannot be perceived, or remembered, in part – they are perceived and remembered, if at all, as wholes."[2] A ritual must do more than just recall an emotion through repetition. It must be experienced as a unified performance.

Most theorists would accept that a ritual is a formalized, collective, institutionalized kind of repetitive action, but there is still a bewildering range of answers to the question, "what is a ritual?" One is tempted to take refuge in the famous quip of the United States Supreme Court justice who, when asked to define pornography, replied he could not define it but he knew it when he saw it. The same could be said for ritual. The possibilities range from a narrow definition that restricts ritual to religious practices that attempt to gain access to the supernatural to a broad one that sees ritual in nearly any form of repeated, formalized human activity. The touchstone of the modern analysis of ritual has been the critical distinction between the profane and sacred in Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912):

> All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, 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 two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred*.[3]

From this point of view, rituals function as "rules of conduct" that guide the behavior of men and women in the presence of the sacred.

More recently scholars have been less certain that ritual should be understood as exclusively related to religion or as a way of enforcing a classification scheme. Ritual behavior seems to be nearly as ubiquitous in the domain of the profane as the sacred. Nevertheless, as David Kertzer has pointed out, Durkheim's understanding of religion did not just involve gaining access to the supernatural:

> For Durkheim, worship of a god is the symbolic means by which people worship their own society, their own mutual dependency. Thus, the sacred ultimately refers not to a supernatural entity, but rather to people's emotionally charged interdependence, their societal arrangements. What is important about rituals, then, is not that they deal with supernatural beings, but rather that they provide a powerful way in which people's social dependence can be expressed.[4]

[2] Oliver Sacks, "The Last Hippie," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 39, no. 6 (March 26, 1992), p. 59, n. 13.
[3] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1947), 37.
[4] Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, 9.

From this point of view rituals produced and maintained community solidarity: "it is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves to be in unison."[5] Public rituals in this sense become the necessary way for achieving group cohesion.

The problem with this view of rituals is that many societies struggle with seemingly interminable conflicts, and sometimes the very performance of a ritual seems to incite strife. There have been several possible solutions to this problem. For Max Gluckman and Victor Turner rituals do not unify all divisions but create solidarity in the few parts of society shared by all. For David Kertzer the crucial function of rituals is not to get people to agree to things but to create the *experience* of solidarity in the absence of consensus. It is precisely the fact that people cannot agree that makes rituals of solidarity necessary. For Clifford Geertz the problem must be solved in an entirely different way. He argues that rituals do not function to create social solidarity at all but provide enacted narratives that allow people to interpret their own experience. In Geertz's famous formula, rituals produce a story people tell themselves about themselves. The value of studying rituals for him is not that they reveal universal laws about how societies function but that they help us discover the native's point-of-view – that idiosyncratic perspective that differentiates one culture from another.

But even Geertz's elegant solution creates new problems in denying what a ritual does. As Don Handelman points out, rituals – or what he calls "public events" – may not reveal social codes any better than other kinds of activities, and they may not reveal just one social code but many. In other words, they can open up a labyrinth of dissonance rather than a neatly unified vision of society. The identification of differences in rituals can potentially undermine any vision of collectivity. Claude Levi-Strauss identified the process of "parcelling-out" as an essential procedure of ritual, a process that classifies objects and gestures to make infinite distinctions and to give value to the slightest shades of difference. The result is what Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*, the amalgamation of preexisting elements into playful or ritual assemblies: a simple wafer of bread is utterly transformed in the rite of the mass or the simple gesture of dropping a glove takes on a dire significance when it is a challenge to a duel.

Perhaps the best solution to the confusing problem of what rituals do is to make a distinction between what Handelman calls "models" and "mirrors." We commonly understand the word "model" in two ways. First, a model can be useful for thinking in the sense that it provides

[5] Ibid., 61–62.

a standard to follow. A model of comportment, for example, might be a book of manners that defines proper behavior in a variety of difficult social situations. A model might be a "how to" book that explains how to solve a calculus problem, repair a car, or bake a cake. To follow such a model means to think certain thoughts or perform certain actions in accord with the rules the model presents. Second, a model might consist of a miniature of something. Before a building is constructed or an automobile made, the architect or designer fashions a miniature model of it so that the relationship of the parts to the whole can be visualized. The miniature model presents a simplified and closed example that parallels the confusing complexity of the thing it models, but also a model anticipates the future in some way: it allows one to imagine creating something in its image, which is perhaps why so many children's toys are models in this second sense.

Many rituals work like models. They present a standard or a simplified miniature for society to follow. When churchgoers exchange handshakes, they enact a model of goodwill that the ritual encourages people to carry into their daily lives. When public officials calmly walk in an ordered procession they model the behavior expected of them in the conduct of the affairs of state.

Mirrors, on the other hand, present the world as it is understood to be. They have a declarative character: *I* am the king in a coronation, *you* are my enemy in a challenge to a duel, *she* is my wife in a wedding. Rituals that make statements and that present persons or things to the world may constitute the most common examples of rituals. When the Lord Mayor and guard paraded through the streets of London, they were showing themselves to be in charge of the city. In effect, rituals that mirror represent someone or something in a public way. Such rituals can inform and incite emotions, clarify a situation, and even enact a passage from one status to another, but unlike a model they do not offer an alternative for the future constitution of society. A king who performs the rituals of rulership without challenge becomes, in effect, the king whether he is entitled to be or not.

The distinction between models and mirrors is useful for understanding the different kinds of things rituals do, but in practice it is often tricky to determine whether a specific ritual performance is modeling or mirroring. Rituals tend to blur these two processes, which is perhaps the very source of the creative tension in rituals, the tension between a conservative mirroring of what is and the utopian modeling of what might be. Rituals are inherently ambiguous in their function and meaning. They speak with many voices. The sense of disturbance created by the odd juxtapositions that rituals make is also one of the sources of their power,

because anyone who can successfully pull off a ritual performance is playing with danger, and those who survive dangerous situations are feared and followed. Speaking of the Aztecs, Inga Clendinnen summarizes the point eloquently.

> Heavenly powers rarely merely mirror the formal relations of those below, the earthly light being more commonly refracted than reflected. It is the points of stress and abrasion in men's own social experiences, the hidden, obsessive themes in the dialogues they have with one another, which lend urgency and structure to their imagined engagement with the sacred.[6]

The consequence of the engagement in rituals is what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*, those deeply held beliefs and assumptions expressed through gestures and repeated actions, those inner dispositions that integrate past experiences and function at every moment in every perception, appreciation, and action. From this point of view, ritual helps to form and reform all social life, or to put it another way, "we are what we do, not what we think."[7]

Ritual then is basically a social activity that is repetitive, standardized, a model or a mirror, and its meaning is inherently ambiguous. Some scholars place greater emphasis on it as a form of behavior, either as an enactment that creates social solidarity or forms social identities; others focus on ritual as a kind of communication that allows people to tell stories about themselves; and still others see ritual as a collectively created performance, a specific kind of practice that constructs, maintains, and modifies society itself. The question, however, is not what is the true definition, but how can the concept be framed so that it is useful for analysis – so that it has *heuristic* value. A heuristic procedure helps us to discover things, and it might be useful to borrow from several different perspectives to understand how rituals worked in the early modern period of European history.

Ritual and history

These definitions of ritual derive from the observations of anthropologists and sociologists who have witnessed and analyzed ritual performances, on the one hand, and from the experiences of those, such as myself, who have participated in them, on the other. But what happens when a historian attempts to write about past rituals, especially those from the very distant past when the assumptions about ritual might have been quite different

[6] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 68.
[7] Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, 68.

from the present? And what can the historian actually know about past rituals, which cannot be witnessed directly but can only be found in texts that prescribe or describe them or, occasionally, in visual images that depict them?

The problem is evident in the description of the Mormon sacrament that opened this Introduction. What I did was reconstruct my memory of a recurrent ritual experience, a memory that is decades old and therefore fallible and, in fact, the memory of just one person. I have no idea whether others actually felt the feeling of awe about folding the cloth covering the sacramental table as I did. I have no idea whether others have also forgotten the words on the little card. But I am certain that my experience was *not* how the Mormon Church then or now instructs its young priests. The Church was clear about what it wanted me to remember:

> O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it; that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he hath given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen. (*Book of Mormon*, Moroni, 4:3)

The prayer is insistent that its objective is to promote memory: "in remembrance of the body of thy Son," "always remember him." But I forgot. Unrepentant in my forgetfulness, I certainly did not seek to deceive my readers in the above account but described what was true to my own experience of the ritual and what I did remember. Nevertheless my account of the sacrament neither follows Church doctrine nor was designed to promote faith. It was designed to identify something about the emotional experiences that are possible by participating in a ritual, whether one believes in their efficacy or not. What I did was to compose a text about a ritual. Should the reader believe that my text depicts accurately the ritual experience of the Mormon sacrament? Should the historian believe any text that purports to describe a ritual? Simply put, assuming that a textual description of a ritual has anything to do with what actually took place is dangerous. As one historian has warned about ritual, "time has come to forget this dangerous word."[8]

Ritual might be a dangerous word for historians for three reasons. First, especially during the Middle Ages, the centuries just before the period of this book, conceptions of what a ceremony or ritual did were very different from modern notions. For medieval Christians the most important

[8] Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton and Oxford, 2001), 247.

distinction was between "good" and "bad" rituals. The Incarnation and Passion of Christ made Jewish ceremonies irrelevant, and the fact that Jews continued to practice them was an example of an empty, useless, or bad ritual. The same logic was applied to pagan ritual observances. But rituals could be "bad" in another sense. To perform a ritual was risky because it gave one's enemies an opportunity to disrupt or manipulate it to serve their ends. And thus ritual was always potentially dangerous to the social order, not just an opportunity to create or represent community, providing a lubricant for the social system as much of modern ritual theory would assert.

Ritual is also dangerous in a second sense because manipulating the meaning of a ritual in a text was often the goal of writing about a ritual in the first place. In other words, medieval writers described rituals to make a point, much like I did at the beginning of this Introduction, and making that point might not have had much at all to do with what actually happened. Even if there are multiple descriptions of the same ritual, they are all tendentious, all designed to convey an interpretation to the reader. The problem for the historian becomes determining what the intention of the writer was rather than assuming that what is reported was what actually happened.

Ritual is dangerous in a third sense because the theories devoted to defining a ritual discussed above almost always harbor an assumption that rituals are supposed to function in a certain way – to evoke an emotion, build consensus, provide the rules of conduct, model or mirror society. As a consequence it is all too easy to assume one understands what is going on in a past ritual performance because it seems to function in a certain way. But did it and how would we know if it did? That is the danger.

It would be a mistake, however, to despair of the dangers of ritual. All historical investigations require a careful appraisal of the intentions and biases of the authors of historical texts. All historical events can only be understood within the context of the time and place of their occurrence. All past events are mediated through fallible memories and are represented in documents that were written for certain purposes according to the rules of textual composition current at the time. In this respect ritual is no different than any other historical subject. But in another sense rituals are quite unlike other historical events. Rituals are repeated, time after time, often with some variations, but it is their repetitive similarities that distinguish them from battles or diplomatic negotiations. The very idea of repetitive similarity distinguishes a ritual from an individual text that describes an individual event. It is true that one can never directly observe a past ritual event, that all that remains are footprints in the soil, signs that some thing we have chosen to call a "ritual" once

passed by. One might despair that the actual ritual moment is long gone and can never be recaptured, but that does not mean it never existed. One should cultivate the confidence of the master tracker who attempts to read the signs supplied by prints in the soil to infer what kind of thing left its traces. To assume that something never existed because it cannot be directly observed would be a silly mistake and would, of course, create new problems because it would leave the very existence of the prints themselves unexplained. That is the real danger of the dangers of ritual.

One of the tasks of this book is to explain how it came to be that the very concept of ritual became so fuzzy and dangerous, why ritual became both such a common word and such a dangerous one, especially after the sixteenth century. The fundamental task of this book is not to explain ritual in a universally applicable way but to examine rites in the particular historical context of Christian Europe from about 1400 to 1700. Some historians call this period the "long Reformation" because of the intensity with which religious controversies dominated public affairs and private sentiment. The age begins during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries when the ecclesiastical hierarchy struggled to recover from the long papal residency in Avignon and the Great Schism of the church, and new heresies broke out in England and Bohemia that challenged the sacramental privileges of the clergy. At the same time laymen and women in cities across Europe experienced an unprecedented spiritual reawakening manifest in new pious practices and which spread doubt about the usefulness of sacramental rituals for promoting ethical behavior. During the fifteenth-century Renaissance a few intellectuals began to reconsider Christian practice by reinvestigating Hebrew and pagan learning. During the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformation permanently divided Christian society into mutually suspicious and hostile camps, each led by powerful monarchs who made claims to special authority derived from God.

The early modern period was also the most crucial moment in history for ritual theory. It was during the Reformation that the generalized concept of *ritual* as a distinct kind of activity came into being. The practice of what we would recognize as rites had, of course, always been an essential component of Western culture, and medieval Latin employed the term *ritus* for the liturgical practices of the church, but the invention of the idea of "ritual" belongs to the sixteenth century. The term was originally employed in a pejorative sense to describe the disreputable practices of somebody else: what I do was ordained by God and is "true religion"; what you do is "mere ritual," at best useless, at worst profoundly evil. The appearance of the word "ritual," moreover, indicates a major intellectual

shift in the understanding of the relationship between human behavior and meaning.

That shift, which precipitated a historical revolution in ritual theory, anticipated some of the modern definitions of ritual discussed above. The Reformation debate derived from a deceptively simple question: "what do rites do?" The range of answers, some of which betrayed remarkable ingenuity, stretched across a wide spectrum. To simplify the situation, at one extreme was what might be called the traditional position, *the doctrine of presence*. From this point of view, which came to be associated with dogmatic Catholicism, rites made something "present." The most obvious and ubiquitous example derived from the Eucharistic rites of the mass, when at the moment of consecration Christ became physically present in the host. Rituals also had the ability to enact, to bring something into being: when an infant was baptized original sin disappeared, when a couple said "I do" they passed into the married state, when a crown was placed on a man's head he became king. The doctrine of presence implied a certain understanding of time and space: something is "present" by being here, now, and "not present" by not being here, now. According to this view, what was present in rituals was usually a body, whether the body of an infant at the baptismal font, the body of Christ in the Eucharist, or the body of the king as he progressed in triumph into a city.

The first part of this book will explore how this doctrine influenced concepts of time. The attributes of time in traditional rituals might be called the "ritual moment," which included rites of passage, such as those of baptism, transition to a new social status, marriage, and death. The ritual moment can also be seen in the passage of calendrical or liturgical time in annual, weekly, daily, and hourly cycles.

A second part will examine the rituals that specifically pertain to the human body. These both borrowed from and helped create the vocabulary of gestures that constituted the *habitus* of traditional Christian practice. During the early modern period, the rituals of the body came to be bifurcated into those associated with the passionate lower body and those with the rational upper body, providing a radical division of body parts that signified contrasting social values and has had striking implications for modern consciousness.

The opposite extreme from the doctrine of presence in the Reformation debate was *the theory of representation*. According to the humanists and Protestant reformers who espoused some form of this theory, rituals should not be understood as a kind of behavior that created presences and enacted states of being but as an aspect of language that communicated meaning. The Eucharist reminded believers of Christ's sacrifice rather than offering up his actual physical body. The coronation of a king