

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING A PATH AND WALKING A PATH: CONTEXT IS ALL

William G. Doty

Ronald Grimes is right on target in suggesting that rituals are among the most visible aspects of religion and culture,<sup>1</sup> even as he suggests—as would most of my disciplinary compatriots—that “ritual” is no less a modern academic construct than “religion.”<sup>2</sup> This is the result of the self-awareness of postmodernist studies that have recognized how arbitrarily and repeatedly Western consciousness has taken specific markers of its own particular historical period as “the truth,” as “universal human values,” as opposed to recognizing the limited temporality of the analytical terms of any particular period of scholarly analysis. Consequently, I will not present an analytic practised within a clearly defined ritual studies methodology—since several methods are still being devised. I will instead wander some of the paths being explored, and hope you will find some of them valuable for the Humanities Research Group this year.

Ritual in my own career first became focal in 1961 when I was a professional researcher for a project on the connections between leisure and religion in American culture. It was then that I encountered the magisterial work of Johannes Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*,<sup>3</sup> and associated studies such as Roger Callois’ *Man, Play, and Games*,<sup>4</sup> and *game theory* in general, which was somewhat influenced by Wittgenstein’s treatment of language games, and of major concern at the RAND Corporation and the US Military in the 1960s.

Another milestone was the work of Victor Turner, whom I met while teaching in Chicago. His adaptation and development of the path-breaking *The Rites of Passage* by Arnold Van Gennep<sup>5</sup> had enormous influence across academic disciplines, including literary studies. Most humanist and social science researchers today will recognize Turner’s emphasis upon the transitional—that is, *liminal* — phase or upon ritual *process*. These ideas have more recently been developed by Grimes and others, and understood

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, “Ritual,” in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 262.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Anon. trans. from the German 1944 ed., (Boston: Beacon, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> Roger Callois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Chicago: Free Press), 1961.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (1908; reprint Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

under the term *ritualization*. Such shifts in scholarship reflect a clear move from standard, early twentieth century presentations of static rituals represented in literary form, such as the Ancient Near Eastern Akitu/New Year's Festival, or the Christian Mass, and toward dynamic analysis of ritual behaviours.

Perhaps here is to be found a link with the "economies" of your Humanities Research Group's theme this year: one shading of the concept "economy" derives from the Greek *oikos*, house or household, and its management. "Economic ritualization" would then refer to how a traditional group influences, manages, and analyses public or civic behaviours of a society. I don't think your focus is too far from what happened in literary criticism several years ago when it turned its attention away from the dead artifact on the page, which was The New Criticism approach, and took up *Receptions-geschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or when art history turned to reception aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> In both instances, the focus shifted toward contents that were sensitive to the *process* of literary or artistic production and audience reception.

Tom Driver has emphasized the importance of treating the process of ritualizing as a counter to the traditional perspective that rituals are static and unchanging. He stresses the gerundive value of "ritualizing" or ritualization, which allows us to conceive "of ritual, using a developmental perspective, not as some kind of eternal form but the result of *activity* in which both humans and animals engage;"<sup>7</sup> he calls the opposite, conservative view *ritualism*. Driver hopes such an approach will help us to see rituals "as having been created in the course of time on the basis of ritualizations evolved . . . to cope with danger, to communicate, and to celebrate."<sup>8</sup>

Catherine Bell's book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, considers ritualization a useful concept to illustrate that rituals are not merely displays of subjective states or corporate values, but *acts of production*, "a strategic way of acting."<sup>9</sup> The moulding of the body within a highly structured

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*. Eds. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder: Westview Harper Collins, 1998); reprint, with a new introduction, of *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 185.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7-8.

environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely *communicate* subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinated kneeler in and through the act itself.<sup>10</sup> The body here is a socialized body<sup>11</sup>—well expressed by Joseph Driskill: “rituals tap unconscious as well as conscious levels of meaning and provide a way for the body to remember and speak.”<sup>12</sup>

Bell’s position also recognizes that rituals diversify according to specific contexts:

ritual is not the same thing everywhere; it can vary in every feature. As practice, the most we can say is that it involves ritualization, that is, a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does; moreover, it makes this distinction for specific purposes. A practice approach to ritual will first address how a particular community or culture ritualizes . . . and then address when and why ritualization is deemed to be the effective thing to do.<sup>13</sup>

This will represent “its real context, which is the full spectrum of ways of acting within any given culture, not some a priori category of action independent of other forms of action.” Hence to make the usual Durkheimian distinction between religious and secular ritual is, I take it, meaningless: indeed, Part III of Bell’s *Ritual*, “Contexts: The Fabric of Ritual Life,” includes Kwanzaa, the socialist rites of the former Soviet Union, and various American national rites.<sup>14</sup>

Such emphasis upon sociohistorical context strikes me as a move toward more economical or ethical analysis: it is the completion of the classical interpretive tripod of (1) exegesis/explication, (2) interpretation: referring to probable meanings of the text in its own historical and ideological context (in religious contexts, this is called “biblical theology”), and finally (3) *applicatio*, some indication of what the text can mean in a later—usually our own—situation.

Perhaps I’m still a 1960s hippie, but I do think that the academic world

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 93, 98.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Driskill, “The Significance of Ritual in the Case of Joanne: Insights from Depth Psychology,” in eds. Michael Aune and Valerie DeMarini, *Religious and Social Ritual: Interdisciplinary Explorations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Bell, *Perspectives and Dimensions*, 237.

needs to be remanded to “relevance” and practical applications of knowledge. This need persists even though *les événements* (student protests in France) of May 1968 led in many ways to a restructuring of the soul and mind of European university life, and thence rippled across Western culture, to be expressed most intensely within the contours of postmodernist thought and a deconstructionism that seemed to threaten the very concept of innate values.

Perhaps the most relevant question that has greeted my presentations on mythography is “how can we determine which myths are most valuable?” At the University of Michigan/Dearborn yesterday (October 2, 2003) I worked this theme, suggesting that informed choice boils down not to some universal substrate of myths, but to what they will mean when they are replicated and *applied* in a society.

I find highly interesting Driver’s suggestion that interest in and desire for ritual is especially high “when people feel a prolonged or acute absence of moral guidance”<sup>15</sup>—an issue exacerbated within postmodernist rejection of absolute universal values, on the one hand, but also highlighted on the other by the very strong interest in such values-determination by Jacques Derrida in his later writings,<sup>16</sup> and in several other recent volumes on deconstruction and ethics or religion.

Certainly it is not enough to point to what the Nazi theorists did with a hastily reconstructed and Nazified Teutonic folklore and mythology; we must also point to the ways in which something like the myth of the American Western Frontier Cowpuncher Hero still dominates the mind set and language of the current Bush White House and the President’s Cabinet. This is the judgment in two works by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* and *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*.<sup>17</sup>

These works have been the backbone of my recent honours seminars and writings on The Heroic Model in Life, Literature, and Film. Both books challenge the knee-jerk assumption that mythic models created in the 1940s to celebrate the relatively brief period of the closing of the Frontier can still function satisfactorily as a means of addressing current threats or challenges to American hegemony.

In fact they may lead to repression within the country in an executive

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<sup>15</sup> Driver, *Liberating Rites*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> See the selection of essays by Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge-Taylor and Francis, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); and *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

branch of the government that manipulates information more extensively than any previous administration—I am of course referring to the so-called USA Patriot Act, according to which librarians now are required to report who reads what and are prohibited from informing their own patrons that such repressive measures are now standard practice.

Such works as Jewett and Lawrence's help to flesh out the importance of the sociohistorical contexts in which mythical and ritual models arise; and they repeatedly challenge the exaggerated neocon cloaking of patriarchal power and imperialistic expansionism. The postmodernist insistence upon sociohistorical context, already established in ethnography two or more generations ago, is itself an important ethical standpoint: it refuses to allow treatment of any "*grand récit*" or "master narrative" as if it were preternaturally timeless and frozen in amber.

William Dean brilliantly dissects the "rise of the West,"<sup>18</sup> demonstrating that the concrete historical process and the self-centering narrative enclosed by such a phrase functioned more as a tool of aggression and domination than as a reflection of any "natural" growth in superiority. Hence, it comes time that the risen West recognizes its complicity in the politics of its own day and its colonialist or post-colonialist consequences. Mythological and ritual formulations and images, no less than ritual actions and referents, are part of the all-pervasive everyday of socially constructed and socially constrained public and private existence.

In *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, and Legacy*, Burt Mack reminds us that while the critique of mythology and religion in the Enlightenment—proceeding under the names of rationalism and Deism—seemed to confront traditional religious assumptions, it still remained primarily grounded in centuries-old Christian theological principles: "[m]yths were thought of as systems of 'belief' and the underlying questions had to do with the 'reasons' for thinking that the myths were 'true'."<sup>19</sup> The late nineteenth century established the linking of myths and rituals and both of them to emergent evolutionary concepts of culture and religion—both of which were supposed to have begun at some "primitive" level and then progressed toward what we may as well call modernity.

Such historical contexts of scholarship itself are as important—just think what this means for the traditional concept of myth "versus" truth, considered an Enlightenment legacy—as the ideological frameworks that support one or another type of historical investigation and reconstruction. Mack notes that various types of discourse must always be related to praxis,

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<sup>18</sup> William Dean, *The American Spiritual Culture and the Invention of Jazz, Football, and the Movies* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 29.

<sup>19</sup> Burt Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, and Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 14-15.

social life, and the history of transmission.<sup>20</sup>

Scholarship on early Christianity has had to pay dearly for the theological trajectory stretching from Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, through Hegesippus and Eusebius, which saw early Christian development as beginning with the magical incursion of the divine within Jesus' own *qahal* (community) of followers, followed by insistent attacks from the "heretics" on the outside.

Such scholarship now recognizes that what resulted from the Jesus movement within Hellenistic Judaism was soon infinitely removed from connections with the historical *Didaskalos* or Rabbi or Teacher—the primary term applied to Jesus in the Greek New Testament. The revisionist or "redescriptive" view now pays attention to disparities and conflicts among the recorded traditions, seeing them not as a *problem*—heresy characterized as an attack from the outside, threatening the sacred inner integrity of a catholic church—but as an actual *reflection* of the complexities in organizing a new religious sect<sup>21</sup> that has primarily social rather than divinely inspired contexts.<sup>22</sup> Heresies are now more properly understood as some of the diverse interpretations (*hairesis* literally derives from "splinter" group) that were later silenced by normative Roman orthodoxies.

I think that most of what transpires in the truly-liberal arts of academe is redescriptive in focus, insisting upon self-criticism as essential to respectable scholarship, but I need at this point to come clean in my presentation with respect to my rather insignificant ritual studies credentials: much of what I know about matters ritualistic has been learned from my Canadian friend and colleague Ronald Grimes, Wilfred Laurier University's professor of religion and culture. We were both influenced strongly by the Native peoples and ceremonies of our home state, New Mexico, in the American Southwest. I learned only last week that he is your final lecturer in this series, and that in a magnificent academic "performance" (the title of his presentation), he will undo all the wrongs I commit here this evening. I feel like a ritologist *manqué* over against his depth and brilliance in ritual studies—works I have vetted repeatedly for the likes of the University of California Press and Westview Harper Collins.

Grimes has moved from summaries of ritual studies and important works in ritual criticism to an emphasis upon *performance* that is shared by Tom Driver and Catherine Bell, the acting-out of ritual. I would like to emphasize the richly-interdisciplinary nature of the field of ritual studies and religious studies and to pursue how it is that Grimes considers ritual a

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

“provocative” notion within scholarship<sup>23</sup>—but I was quite embarrassed to discover in the bibliography of works on ritual studies of the last decade compiled by my colleague, Michael Murphy, that because of my close focus upon myth studies for another book, *Myth: A Handbook*,<sup>24</sup> I have remained ignorant of many productive publications in the field of ritual studies, and subsequently have not found much time to recap my shortcomings.

What I *can* do is to point to some of the major recent advances in this interdisciplinary field, assuming that you can catch up to the most recent developments on your own, by following some of the bibliographies and surveys that are readily available.

I will not take time to talk about the process of interdisciplinary research here,<sup>25</sup> but I was struck in just the first two pages of Aune and DeMarinis’ *Religious and Social Ritual: Interdisciplinary Explorations*<sup>26</sup> to find so many disciplines referred to: history of religions, medical anthropology, various branches of psychology, anthropology of religion, neo-analytical psychotherapy, liturgical studies, feminist psychiatry, theology, religious studies, and transcultural psychology. Within a few additional pages, theory of action, sociology of knowledge, and health care are also mentioned. In another book, even with a fairly narrow focus upon *Ritualizing Women*, Lesley Northrup mentions that she has referred to scholarship from such diverse fields as ritual studies, anthropology, history, theology, feminist theory, liturgics, sociology, and cultural criticism.<sup>27</sup>

My attempt here is not to be all inclusive and synoptic, but to point in some recent directions that promise—much like the work of Derrida and Michel Foucault—to open up various fields of scientific investigation and interpretation that have been long suppressed by traditional scholarship. By comparison with many other subdisciplinary fields, non-theological ritual studies is only a few decades old, appearing formally only in the late 1960s

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<sup>23</sup> Grimes, “Ritual,” in Braun and McCutcheon, eds., *Guide*, 267.

<sup>24</sup> William Doty, *Myth: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> See Julie Thompson Klein and Doty, eds., *Interdisciplinary Studies Today*, 58 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994); Doty and Klein, eds., *Interdisciplinary Resources*. Special No. 8 of *Issues in Integrative Studies*, (1990,) and Klein *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory and Practice* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Aune and Valerie DeMarinis, eds. *Religious and Social Ritual: Interdisciplinary Explorations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Lesley Northrup, *Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Spirituality* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1997), 7.

and then developing rapidly over the two succeeding decades.<sup>28</sup> The works of Bell and Grimes track the developments of this subfield.

Let me move from these mostly autobiographical statements to naming some classic works in the field with respect to a few of the most recent restatements that I have found significant for the importance of multi-/cross-/inter-disciplinary approaches in the social sciences and humanities. I also stress the need to focus on the local, historical, and contextual aspects of ethnographic materials *within* the universal or archetypal frameworks of a newly repristinized comparativism. In classics, this is referred to as the balancing of the epichoric (specifically local) and the Olympian.

If I remain somewhat telegraphic with respect to the earlier giants in the field, my apologies—but I do so only where I have treated them in my *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, or where their work is readily accessed on the internet, or in publications by Grimes, Bell, Driver, and others.

Part of ritual studies associated with the academic discipline of religious studies (older departments are often labelled simply “religion”) in North America has clearly been touched by the negative reaction over the last several decades to the universalizing perspectives of the sort of comparative religion studies long associated with Mircea Eliade, with its sweeping theologizing interpretations. In their place has come an emphasis that the University of California/Riverside’s Ivan Strenski, in a brief but rich overview published in the American Academy of Religion publication, *Religious Studies News*, aptly titles “Material Culture and the Varieties of Religious Imagination.”<sup>29</sup>

Strenski points to recent interest in visual, tactile, or sensate religious entities and events—precisely the elements that the sociological founders of religious studies such as Émile Durkheim railed against precisely for their *materiality*, just as they railed against ritual as always being more or less “magical” or “superstitious.” Others have pointed to what is called “lived religion” (from the common French phrase in the sociology of religion, *la religion vécue*), which is studied by focussing on the actual activities—however it is that these are defined as “religious”—that people in

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<sup>28</sup> For a quick survey of ritual studies see Jan Fernback, “Internet Ritual: A Case Study of Computer-Mediated Neopagan Religious Meaning,” in Stewart Hoover and L. Clark, eds, *Practising Religion in the Age of the Media; Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, (New York Columbia University Press, 2000) 257-59

<sup>29</sup> Ivan Strenski, “Material Culture and the Varieties of Religious Imagination” *Religious Studies News*, May 2003: iii-iv.

the pews engage in outside of purely liturgical contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Earlier spiritualist assumptions about the nature of religious observance led to expressed abhorrence with regard to the fleshly body, sexuality, and the physical trappings of religious communities—precisely those elements that have come to the fore in recent studies. An example is provided by Carolyn Morrow Long's *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce*, which charts the mercantile commodification of traditional magical objects from Africa to the Americas.<sup>31</sup>

Long treats the various sanctifying sprays and oils, floor washes, incenses, candles, and botanicals with respect to the manner in which these objects change in meaning when they are mass produced without the rituals traditionally performed during their manufacture by spiritual specialists. A note on the volume appeared in an online review of re-cent studies of magic (<http://www.wordtrade.com/religion/magic.htm>) that also includes books on magic and ritual in the ancient world. It seems that Western abstract theological categories are seldom useful when confronting what many actual practitioners regard as efficacious.

Strenski suggests that the religious *imagination* expressed in the arts is an important locus in which to study the human imaginative function, and indeed studies by Villanova's David Morgan, especially *Visual Piety* and *The Visual Culture of American Religions*,<sup>32</sup> do show just how the imagination can be instructed. For instance, Thomas Sully's famous painting of 1821, *Interior of the Capuchin Chapel in the Piazza Barberini*, garnered much of its fame from "the technological 'production of the observer' through exhibition practices,"<sup>33</sup> basically how it was marketed. Morgan's observation is miles distant from earlier "high culture" art-historical aesthetics that seldom admitted that "real" artists sweated or indulged in (shh!) sex.

Morgan's *Visual Piety* draws our attention to the prosaic side of American popular culture, understanding religion as "a particular category

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<sup>30</sup> A helpful selection of essays will be found in David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Morgan with Sally M. Promey, *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, *Visual Culture*, 127.

of the things that mark . . . everyday life,”<sup>34</sup> producing a “visual rhetoric” in art<sup>35</sup> that is important to recognize as part of an artwork’s original context. Likewise Brent Plate’s excellent *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture* also contributes to a “reimagination of the study of religion,”<sup>36</sup> a way of comprising “a religious seeing” that does not so much seek to determine theological themes as to teach one to “look” in a particularly attentive fashion.

One “looks,” for instance, at the context in which something is displayed or performed. Plate writes: “museums are not neutral receptacles in which artists work to fill the empty space. Instead, museum curators work with collectors, financially supportive companies, and others, helping to actively shape artistic values, financial values, and aesthetic judgments about art. . . . Like it or not, art and politics intermingle.”<sup>37</sup> In his own chapter on Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin, Plate demonstrates how the material layout and architecture of the museum recreate the experiences of the Shoah being represented: there are disorienting intersections; walls are not quite square; one cannot find a simple path in the Garden of Exile; spaces open out unexpectedly, onto nothing; and when one finally progresses to the very centre, there is only scorched earth.

Other scholars claiming precedence for “redescriptive” religious studies—such as Russell McCutcheon<sup>38</sup>—have likewise challenged the universalistic, basically theological perspective on religion as non-ordinary and *sui generis*, and hence exempt from scholarly critical views. This perspective is simply *de trop*, or “too much,” because it rests on the unconscious assumptions of colonialist white males and it relies upon now-discredited universal theological claims.

In *Film as Religion*, John Lyden has opened new perspectives on another sort of looking, that of the film audience: he is not interested in traditional studies of religious themes *in* films—the saviour figure in *The Matrix*—but in the way in which audiences experience *all* of a film “religiously”—watching with silent awe, accepting its premises without

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<sup>34</sup> Morgan, *Visual Piety*, xi.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Brent Plate, *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 10; see also Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998) and *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> See Grimes, “Ritual,” in Braun and McCutcheon, eds., *Guide*, 259-70.

criticism, often adoring the superstar actors, and so forth.<sup>39</sup> In my recent teaching I have been astonished by what happens—no matter which film I screen—the moment that the house lights dim.

Strenski's article referred to earlier seeks to structure our seeing, as any righteous phenomenological hermeneut would: ritual studies practitioners can be led to observe how "sacredness is engineered by the manipulation of space and selection of place."<sup>40</sup> Analysis of space and place anchor another aspect of contemporary anthropology of religion, as indicated by the panel of papers on "Making Space Sacred" at the American Academy of Religion convention in Atlanta in November 2003. Interestingly enough, when I pulled down the convention program schedule, I found that not only the Arts, Literature, and Religion section had such a panel (to which I am the general respondent), but also an archaeologically-oriented group (the Relics and Sacred Territory Consultation), and the Anthropology of Religion Consultation had a panel entitled "Pilgrims and Tourists: Religion and the Construction of Travel."

In a curious way, one conclusion of Strenski's project has been "to destroy the distinction, often touted popularly these days, between religion and so-called 'spirituality' . . . . [A]lthough 'spirituality' is often opposed to 'religion,' their similarities strike one as far more prominent than their supposed differences."<sup>41</sup> Note that a similar observation might be made within anthropological and religious studies analyses of food. In the same issue of *Religious Studies News* in which Strenski's piece appeared, Daniel Sack talked about "Teaching with Food," a topic he has researched very carefully, as exhibited in his insightful book entitled *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion*.<sup>42</sup>

Something of the realism of the new materialist approach can be gathered from the beginning of Sack's *Religious Studies News* article: "[e]veryone eats. It's a truism, but it's a truism useful in teaching about religion." He finds that exploring food in religious contexts provides a comparative perspective on various rituals, allows for research to be more experiential, and offers a thick description of religious life such as Clifford Geertz promotes. Sack's book suggests that "while Communion is a central ritual of the faith, the meals in the fellowship hall are often a more important

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<sup>39</sup> John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Strenski provides a series of analytical questions, iv.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002).

part of church life for many whitebread Protestants.”<sup>43</sup> Such meals are rituals that reflect and reinforce members’ world views, including assumptions about the structure of the family, what ideal social relationships entail, and the mission of the particular Protestant church.

*Whitebread Protestantism* also reflects upon how society modified centuries of religious observance, when the germ theory of disease developed in the late nineteenth century: fearing contagion (and contact with the now awkwardly intrusive “other” as the States became more polyglot), the primary symbol of the family of God coming together in a Eucharistic banquet was transformed into the privatized experience of sipping from many tiny individual cups instead of the common chalice. One illustration in *Whitebread Protestantism* limns tiny individual plastic cups complete with a capful of pasteurized grape juice and a tiny biscuit, each shrink-wrapped, to be opened and consumed in the pews by oneself, much like “walking with Jesus in the garden alone.”<sup>44</sup>

Just as striking is the illustration<sup>45</sup> of a very liberal Chicago Protestant church where some six stations for communion were provided—each with its own unique way of “communing.” Sack writes that his focus upon rituals of food-sharing “reminds our students that religion is more than just theology, ethics, ritual, or practice; it is a complex mixture of behaviours and beliefs.”<sup>46</sup>

Such complexity of ritual studies is borne out on the German web site of the *National Geographic* magazine ([http://www.nationalgeographic.de/php/magazine/redaction/2001/07/redaction\\_geographica.htm](http://www.nationalgeographic.de/php/magazine/redaction/2001/07/redaction_geographica.htm), accessed 05/19/03), which refers to articles on materials such as the ritual significance of mummification, burial rites in Mesoamerica, contemporary solstice ceremonies in Europe and America, Stonehenge ceremonies, Africa ritual art, and pilgrimage routes in ancient Peru.

And some fifteen academic disciplines are named in the thirty projects of an important *Forschungsinitiative zu Rolle, Wandel, und Sinn von Ritual* (a research initiative treating the role, alternative interpretations, and meaning of ritual). Here, for instance, the emphasis upon material culture is to be identified by the stress upon the concrete findings of archaeology (see Murphy’s bibliography). This is striking in light of Grimes’s preface to the second edition of *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* in 1995 where he noted that interdisciplinary ritual studies had been slow in getting off the ground.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Sack, “Teaching with Food,” *Religious Studies News*, May 2003: vi.

Grimes's 1996 *Readings* chrestomathy already noted that "a striking feature of the conferences, proposals, and courses" across several disciplinary venues "is their interdisciplinary composition."<sup>47</sup> His collection consequently includes religious studies, anthropology, theology, history, psychology, law, media studies, ethology, performance studies, literature, and the arts among its perspectives, in a collection "aimed at interdisciplinary audiences."<sup>48</sup>

Ritual studies venues have been remarkably cross- and interdisciplinary, probably largely because of their youth: while old-style ritual studies were mostly focussed upon religious liturgies and involved theological criteria, ritual studies work since the 1960s has imbricated particularly anthropological and sociological studies, as well as gender, race, and class studies, performance and theatre analysis, and several other fields including neurobiology and biogenetic structuralism.

In just a few words at the conclusion of a conference at Indiana University devoted to revisiting the classic volume, *Myth: A Symposium*,<sup>49</sup> edited by Thomas Sebeok—the proceedings were published last year in *Myth: A New Symposium*<sup>50</sup>—Harvard classicist Gregory Nagy refracted an insight of a French colleague, Pierre-Yves Jacopin, in noting the dangers of reading myth purely as text, which "threatens to flatten our conceptualization of myth: it removes the dimension of myth-performance;" Nagy suggests that were we fully to acknowledge that ritual dimension, we would recognize "myth itself

. . . as a form of ritual: rather than thinking of myth and ritual separately and only contrastively, we can see them as a continuum in which myth is a verbal aspect of ritual while ritual is a notional aspect of myth."<sup>51</sup>

That ritual is performative, causing a condition to be sustained or some new condition to happen, has become established in the kit of ritual studies analysis by Driver, Grimes, and Bell. As opposed to the communicative function of myth, ritual is understood as less communicative than

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<sup>47</sup> Grimes, *Readings*, xiii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Sebeok, *Myth: A Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965).

<sup>50</sup> Gregory Schrempp and William Hansen, *Myth: A New Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> Pierre-Yves Jacopin, "On the Syntactic Structure of Myth, or the Yakuna Invention of Speech," *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1988): 132. See also Gregory Nagy, "Can Myth Be Saved?" in Gregory Schrempp and William Hansen, eds., *Myth: A New Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 242.

performative—after all, most people already *know* what is being expressed in ritual actions; they do not expect some form of communication to bring them new information.<sup>52</sup> The performances are direct expressions of intentions, particular agencies, or power. Rituals are directly embodied symbolic expressions, and not simply intimations; enactments, not merely referents to transcendental meanings lodged elsewhere.

The emphasis upon *doing* within ritual processes seems to me to be extremely important—we are miles away from the Durkheimian distrust of enacted ritualized religiosity, and much closer to understanding how it is that even in a postmodernist climate of anti-*grands récits*, we witness growths of religious buildings that comprise some of the largest buildings in the metropolis. A single Southern Baptist church complex will soon encompass several city blocks at the centre of my own downtown, and the Methodists and Presbyterians are not far behind. The religiously ritualistic *doing* seems sometimes—at least to this outsider—to proceed without the slightest nod to intellectual-theological considerations: one wonders how elaborate gymnasia and childcare facilities minister to non-churched citizens.

Agency is a new term in cultural studies that can be defined variously, but I am primarily concerned here to talk about “situated social practice,” the way authors do in Felicia Hughes-Freeland’s collection of studies in *Ritual, Performance, Media*.<sup>53</sup> This editor suggests that for her contributors,

ritual generally refers to human experience and perception in forms which are complicated by the imagination [Strenski’s interest we saw earlier], making reality more complex and unnatural than more mundane instrumental spheres of human experience assume. Ritual in these terms is *part of distinct situations*.<sup>54</sup>

Here we touch upon the importance of specific contexts of ritual/religious/mythic expression, but here I want also to suggest an alternative to the usual—largely Marxian—understanding of religion as the conservative dead hand (Marx’s “opiate”) of the past. Indeed, I think it important that we recover the sense in which social practices such as political and religious rituals have contributed—and may well contribute in the future—to social change and not merely to passive repetition of ancient norms driven by values and morals now mostly irrelevant to twentieth century experience, individual or corporate.

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<sup>52</sup> Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2, 64, 72-73.

<sup>53</sup> Felicia Hughes-Freeland, *Ritual, Performance, Media*, ASA Monograph. No. 35 (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 2, my emphasis.

Hughes-Freeland suggests that “ritual really *does* something other than mystify”—it “produces persons” much as the mass media often “produce alternative frames [to business as usual] which militate against fixity, reification, and essentialization. Realities and roles become constituted by the situations we find ourselves in, by our variable agency.”<sup>55</sup> Obviously rituals are extremely important in gender- and identity-construction as well as in imagining possible ways that one might configure individual and social futures.

Such constructions do not remain stable, but wobble over time. A comment by anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, in a 1938 report on two seasons of work among the Navajo inhabitants of New Mexico, led him nearly seventy years ago to wonder whether “in this society a generation or more ago” the Navajo Nation would have shown “a comparable intensity of ceremonial activity” compared to what he experienced. His feeling is “that the present almost hysterical frequency of ceremonies is related to the fact that only recently has this Navajo group felt the full impact of our culture.”<sup>56</sup> and in response was compensating by means of a revival of ritual praxis. Rituals can connect and adjust various elements of the most contemporary with the most antique components of social expressions of meanings that a society has found significant

Northrup’s *Ritualizing Women*, which I’ve already mentioned, is a study of patterns of spirituality among women. It demonstrates that ritualizing has become an extremely important way to claim the power to invent, obtain control over, and re-interpret many of the symbolic resources of their religious traditions.<sup>57</sup> Northrup focuses for instance upon the importance of the *horizontal spatiality* that has often appeared when women organize themselves for new ritual configurations: the structure is almost always not apical but circular, indicating that there is no single director or priest.<sup>58</sup> She recognizes that the “sacred” is found repeatedly within the daily, ordinary events of women’s lives, not just in the separative times and special buildings of traditional religious institutions.<sup>59</sup>

Their ritualizations—often driven by feminist concerns—stress that “rituals can misrecord, revise, and edit history,”<sup>60</sup> and that “ritual expression

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>56</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn, “Participation in Ceremonials in a Navajo Community,” *American Anthropology* 40/3 (1938): 359.

<sup>57</sup> Northrup, *Ritualizing Women*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 58-59.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 93.

and action can be, and often are, political expression and action.”<sup>61</sup> Ritual can reflect or influence social change, so that it often “engenders innovative symbolization and models of social reality. The dynamic of ritual and social change works in both directions: although ritual can dampen social alterations, it can also spark them.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, “one of the most effective political aspects of ritualization is its ability to draw people together into a group, to create community, to communicate common grievances, values, and goals, and to forge the group into a united front for change.”<sup>63</sup> Such ritualized coalitions of women have been especially effective in resisting the repressive status quo of leaders and institutions in the contemporary world.

Rituals clearly have a performative role in adjusting a society to impinging changes from the outside. Another part of their function is to stabilize a society by reinforcing status expectations and participant roles.<sup>64</sup> Ritualizations reinforce social structures, amplify their messages, and rehearse their values.<sup>65</sup> But while consequently rituals are often conservative, recent studies recognize that they also have a role in serving as “a contested space for social action and identity politics—an arena for resistance, negotiation, and affirmation.”<sup>66</sup> The concept of ritualization provides more flexibility in ritual analysis than the more static concept of “ritual,” in that it is “best reconstructed in terms of social practices which are situated and performed.”

Ritualizations are the agents by means of which symbolic (political and religious) values are enacted, embodied, lived out; they are imposed upon various segments of the everyday. And they present an enactive focal space for relating the individual self and the supervening social being—a *mesocosm* between the ideal or universal and the particular and idiosyncratic.<sup>67</sup>

Driver’s *Liberating Rites* is one of the most proactive works urging a liberating and inspiring recovery of rituals in our ongoing reconstruction of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>64</sup> See William Doty, *Mythography*, “How Rituals Serve Society,” (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 398-401, and Driver, *Liberating Rites*, Part III, “Ritual’s Social Gifts.”

<sup>65</sup> William Doty, “Wild Transgressions and Tame Celebrations,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6/2: 124.

<sup>66</sup> Hughes-Freeland and Crain, *Recasting*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Doty, *Mythography*, 333, 312.

society. Betty Flowers's article "Practising Politics in the Economic Myth" takes a truly devastating look at one of the mythic underpinnings of current global society: a mythicised and ritualized rendition of the dollar as god.<sup>68</sup> Mark C. Taylor's *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption*, in press at the University of Chicago Press, likewise explores the ritualistic aspects of the virtual reality of the international financial market and economies.

Of course one of the pitfalls of traditional studies of ritual has been the assumption that the etic (experience-far) observer could determine some single global experience in this or that ritual performance, but contemporary social-construction oriented studies have repeatedly demonstrated the broad range across which participants experience what transpires in social occasions. "Spectatorship as participation" means that one must heed carefully "the diversity of 'publics' that may be present at any particular event, delineating their specific roles and social positions."<sup>69</sup>

Just as I have argued in *Mythography*, namely, that the various experiential and age-related levels of persons engaging myth must always be taken fully into account,<sup>70</sup> so must contemporary ritology recognize the ways in which rituals are engaged with various levels of emotional intensity across the life span or developmental level. Ritual is often thought of as static and unchanging. But actually it is always influenced directly and shaped by its specific context: the time of year; the number of participants; political or economic events; and perhaps in a world where athletics are the reigning religion of choice, whether the team won or lost.

As Martin points out, it is important to recognize that "rituals have diverse functions and that some rituals do several things simultaneously. In a given ritual some functions are clearly more important than others."<sup>71</sup> This sort of perspective leads Bell to recognize "the obvious ambiguity or overdetermination of much religious symbolism" and that, from the point of view of participant reception, rituals can only partially be correlated with traditional concepts of belief. In fact, she finds

growing evidence that most symbolic action, even the basic symbols of a community's ritual life, can be very unclear to participants or interpreted by them in very dissimilar ways. . . . Evidently some level or degree of

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<sup>68</sup> Betty Flowers, "Practising Politics in the Economic Myth," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 18/4: 59-66. Reprinted in Thomas Singer, ed. *The Vision Thing: Myth, Politics, and Psyche in the World* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> Hughes-Freeland and Crain, *Recasting*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Doty, *Mythography*, 79-80.

<sup>71</sup> John Hilary Martin, "Introductory Essay" [to Part I] in eds. Aune and DeMarinis, *Social Ritual*, 22.

social consensus does not depend upon shared information or beliefs, and ritual need not be seen as a simple medium of communicating such information or beliefs.<sup>72</sup>

After all, as we have noted, one participates within the ritual for purposes other than cognition alone: effective rituals reach beyond words into music and emotions and aspirations and feelings. Songs are one way that the body thinks. Of course here I do not refer exclusively to religious rituals, but also to rock concerts and midnight showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) or the huge football extravaganzas such as the Superbowl.

I like anthropologist Roy Rappaport's suggestion that rituals may communicate *more* than myths can, because of their emotional and embodied aspects.<sup>73</sup> Certainly there is a bodily involvement that is accessed in myths only when one refers to their verbal recitation—something almost unheard of today, as mostly myths have become secondary thematics in literature, film, and theatre. But we have already seen that contemporary ritual studies refer primarily to situated social practices rather than to static scenarios preferred by the universalizing interests of the mid twentieth century. We now recognize as well that such social practices have a good deal to do with gender representation<sup>74</sup> and Rappaport suggests that different appropriations or rituals can actually lead to or reflect social inequities<sup>75</sup>—it would be quite unusual for the janitor to be asked to open the church dinner with a prayer.

We touch here *the political imbrications* of ritual within societies, as discussed in Grimes's 1996 reader by several voices<sup>76</sup> and I want here to consider a bit further the "context" of my title. Since ritual is a means of essentially nonverbal, or verbally assisted communication and meaning, we must be cautious about applying only text-based hermeneutics to its sphere. I tried to exercise such caution in "The Winnebago Road of Life and Death and Rebirth,"<sup>77</sup> a study of the enritualization of the Winnebago world view

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<sup>72</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 184.

<sup>73</sup> Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Anthropology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 135.

<sup>74</sup> Hughes-Freeland, *Ritual, Performance, Media*, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 331.

<sup>76</sup> Grimes, *Readings*, see Bell, Davis-Floyd, Handemans, Kertzer, Laire, Wallendorf and Anould—several of these are also useful for lived religion analyses.

<sup>77</sup> William Doty, "The Winnebago Road of Life and Death and Rebirth: Reading a Ritual Drama Religiously," in David Jasper and Mark Ledbetter, eds., *In Good Company: Essays in Honour of Robert Detweiler* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994),

recorded in a ritual first discussed by ethnologist Paul Radin in 1911.

The recorded narrative/textual myths may add important enrichments to the ritual experiences. They may provide the overall historical/mythological perspective where any particular ritual is situated: “myths may provide the long-range social history from which a rite represents only a momentary snapshot”<sup>78</sup> or indeed may extend its semantic/semiotic reach by naming reasons for certain ritual acts.<sup>79</sup> The early twentieth century myth-and-ritual school understood something of these dynamics, for all its privileging of the verbal/written as mostly just *reflecting* “underlying” rituals.

I suppose that the most important of the analytical categories in the interpretive tripod I named near the beginning of my remarks would be the hermeneutical or interpretive: ritual meanings will truly vary among any range of participants, as just stated,<sup>80</sup> and the individual, personal context must be specified in addition to the sociohistorical. We must distinguish just how ritual moments differ from the ordinary ways we behave—how things are somehow made ritually to *fit together* in some essential connection.

The etymological root of the Latin *ritus*, is the Proto-Indo-European *\*ar-*, “to fit together.” Rituals and rites do that of course, as do other derivations of *\*ar-*, such as *harmony*, *aristocracy*, *ornament*, *ration*, *reason*, *arithmetic*, and *rhyme*. Within that semantic scope, ritual can be interpreted conservatively as replicating a primordial sacred origin, as was traditionally held by the comparative religion school, but it can also be understood radically as imagining and completing a new metaphoric revisioning of the status quo.

Driver stresses the ways ritualizations can construct alternate worlds,<sup>81</sup> lay out ways to act,<sup>82</sup> and create instruments to change a situation.<sup>83</sup> Sometimes they are not transformative in the manner of the classic life-cycle rites, but are understood to provide protection or purification,<sup>84</sup> indeed satisfaction of some duty pledged, or initiation of a plea for support

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249-74.

<sup>78</sup> Doty, *Mythography*, 343.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 344.

<sup>80</sup> Emphasized for mythological receptions in Doty, *Mythography*, 373.

<sup>81</sup> Driver, *Liberating Rites*, 80.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

<sup>84</sup> Grimes, “Ritual,” Braun and McCutcheon, eds., *Guide*, 266.

or healing. The phrase “are understood to provide” recognizes the importance of looking at “what constitutes effectiveness for those involved,”<sup>85</sup> which may include the traditional didactic passing along of information or attitudes, but may also have non-cognitive aspects.<sup>86</sup> We seem to be on a cusp of connection between familiar and radically new appreciations of ritual economies. While they may mark “paid” to some past account, they may also pledge to pay a new loan for sustenance and furtherance of life.

Rituals grow community and communities sharing similar readings about the significant of aspects of life. They teach a community means of exerting influence ethically; and they focus upon practice, *doing something with others*, that is thought to be beneficial to individuals, the community, and wider populations, perhaps even to environmental harmony among various life forms.

The rituals of a culture bring into the present a fierce recollection of something in our past that still seems utterly generative. They are part of the cultural storehouses of meaning from which we find parts of our identity. And they can change, mutate, and be remodelled as they sustain utopian hopes for better futures to come.

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<sup>85</sup> Aune and DeMarinis, *Social Ritual*, 165.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 22.