

## **RITUALS - Michael Bennett ([www.michaelbennett.org.uk](http://www.michaelbennett.org.uk))**

In my work on reflexive mythology I consider how we might use this self-aware psychological process to create an erotic identification with the secular sacred. Rituals have a similar function. They provide both space and time away from the routines of everyday life and encourage us to involve our whole being in singing, dancing, gestures, prayers and stories such that we are able to form a relationship with the sacred. Through ritual we are able to: communicate specific meaning about the sacred; express, share and reinforce values; internalise associated meaning through the repetition of traditional routines; keep traditions alive; set aside our workplace and everyday identities in favour of an erotic identification with the sacred. Like many others, I believe that western societies, wherein rituals have often become empty, have needlessly lost the benefits that they provide.

Through the work of Garrigan we are able to make a valid connection between ritual and the secular sacred immanent universals we have identified in Habermas's theory of communicative action. Once ritual theory moved to the position that rituals were essentially social constructs rather than being performances fixed by divine intervention, it was possible to see ritual as being dynamic and critical as well as traditional and conserving. Movements, intonations and the general symbolic paraphernalia that were expressed in traditional rituals became open to interpretation and change as the participants became reflexively aware of their indeterminate nature. However, the awareness that a ritual is a performance does not necessarily lead to a crippling self-consciousness. It is possible to *identify with something without needing to merge with it*. Indeed the reflexivity of the participants creates benefits. It prevents rituals becoming ossified through the false truth-claim that they are directly ordained by a divinity. It frees rituals from being fixed to specific places and times. This enables the realisation that the group process of a ritual is as important as the content of what is being said. Through participation in a ritual we are obliged to see the others involved as partners in a common endeavour.

Ritual is, essentially, a dialogical communicative event between participants of equal status. '... it is neither the ritual location nor the rubrics that produce a peculiar manifestation of religious truth; it is the way people behave in that location and with those rubrics - their intersubjectivity.' (Garrigan 2004: 201-2) The 'peculiar manifestation' I take to be the erotic identification with the secular sacred comprising of the validity claims to truth, justice and

authenticity that are inherent in all communications and are brought to awareness through ritual processes that express intersubjective communicative events. Using Habermas's approach through Garrigan we can see that 'all situations of communicative action are, by virtue of their inherent ideal speech situation-forming tendencies, potential harbingers of a context-transcendence realisation.' (206) An authentic ritual thereby 'fosters an endlessly vibrant truth claim about the presence it simultaneously creates and envisages in the world: the presence of an intersubjectivity that enables redemption.' (201) That is, the redemption of self and others in intersubjective action across the horizon of the universal human fellowship.

Such an approach to ritual will protect us from the problem of scrupulousness as outlined by Ricoeur. (1969) The scrupulous conscience forgets the purpose of a ritual and replaces it with a zealous attention to observing the minutiae of the ceremonial practices. By focusing on the details of observance the scrupulous person reintroduces magic into ritual practice as if a 'correct' symbolic gesture as opposed to a 'false' one can achieve a causal effect. The deconstruction that liberates ritual from dogma is either not attained, or if it was once achieved it has subsequently been reified. The various religious fundamentalisms with which we are currently plagued fit into either category and fail to realise that in performing a rite we are displaying our commitment to respect a sacred that is common to us all rather than applying this gesture as opposed to that. If we avoid the false concreteness of scrupulous observance it is clear to me that ritual practices can help to bring new life to myths and strengthen their ability to connect us to the second sacred.

As an illustration of how we might develop rituals in a secular context we could consider how we assist people who approach death. Assuming that death is not sudden and that the dying person still has adequate mental capacity, how well do we support those approaching death? Many people die alone with little assistance to enable them to come to terms with death and often have inadequate means of putting their life into a meaningful context. Even those lucky enough to be supported by family and friends may still yearn for access to a source of deeper meaning. The religious practice of 'last rites' offers us a model by means of which we may assist a person in their last transition in a fashion that is well suited for secular translation. The ritual of last rites traditionally consists of three parts: a Penance (if the dying person is physically unable to confess then absolution is given), followed by the Anointing of the Sick and finally the Viaticum. Keeping our eyes set on the possibility of a secular translation rather than being concerned with any particular theological claim as to which might be the

‘true’ version of the last rites, the ritual process can be separated into the following connected parts (alongside each of which I offer a secular interpretation).

- The rite begins with a confession or an act of contrition. (We share and reveal those parts of our life which we still think lack authenticity. This enables the near-departed to put down their final existential burdens and relieve the guilt that could not previously gain any expression. For those left behind this helps them to understand the unexplained and inauthentic aspects of the dying person, and assists them in their future actions that try to undo the legacy of any damage they may have inherited. For both parties it helps fulfil our inter-generational duty to the universal fellowship and recognises the secular sacred they share – even in death).
- The dying person repeats their baptismal promises. (This completes the cycle of our commitment to the universal fellowship that we entered at birth and now fulfil as we approach death. Birth and death both shape each other and their reconnection at the end of life endows a meaningful historical shape to the process of our life).
- When the dying person is ready, communion is administered. (We do not have a secular equivalent that recognises and celebrates the deep connection we have with each other through what we share in our bond of fellowship. But if companionship and sharing are the best forms of consolation, then a secular ritual expressing this for people approaching death would add a significant layer of meaning and solace).
- The rite concludes with a blessing. (A secular blessing might take the form of conferring on the dying person a thankful celebration of the value of their life).

Such rituals provide us with a means of making our anamnestic solidarity more concrete, more compelling and more vibrant.

#### **References**

Garrigan, Siobhan (2004) *Beyond Ritual: Sacramental Theology after Habermas*, Aldershot: Ashgate.  
Ricoeur, P. (1969) *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Beacon Press.

See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.

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