

# Introduction

Ritual, like language, tool use, symbolism, and music, is one of the constituent elements in the mix of what it means to be human. The cultural record reveals the persistence and pervasiveness of ritual. The archaeological record suggests that ritual was present at the dawn of humanity. The biological record shows that ritualization is a fundamental feature of animal behavior and contributes to evolutionary processes. To think about ritual, then, is to reflect on human nature, sociality, and culture.

Ritual is something we cannot avoid. Particular rituals may be more or less important to certain people or to certain societies or groups; a devout Catholic goes to Mass each day, and the Hopi discreetly invest enormous amounts of time, money, and energy in ritual activity throughout the year. But even if we do not consider ourselves ritual beings or our society ritually based, an encounter with ritual in the course of a lifetime is as sure as the rising and setting of the sun. Weddings, funerals, birthdays, inaugurations, graduations, festivals, parades, liturgies, the exchange of gifts—ritual permeates our social and personal life worlds. Ritual is formative of who we are, and we variously experience the rites and ceremonies that cross our paths as uplifting or boring, exploitive or empowering, creative or moribund. To think about ritual is to explore its place, power, and potential in our lives and our society.

For people raised in the modern and postmodern industrial West, ritual has been significantly marginalized from cultural and intellectual landscapes. Historically, the influence of Protestant and Enlightenment sensibilities led to a suspiciousness of ritual. Compared with science, reason, and the market, ritual has often been derided as a relatively ineffectual way of engaging the world. On the other hand, in recent critical discussions on the nature and project of modernity, ritual is making something of a comeback, and there is a newfound popular interest in the creative, critical, transformative potential of ritual. To think about ritual is to reflect on attitudes and assumptions informing the narrative arc of modernity.

A book on ritual, even a short one, ought to be able to answer the simple question, what is ritual? But, going out the gate we run in to a problem, one common to many fields of inquiry. Ritual has been studied from a variety of scholarly disciplines; as a result, it has been approached and defined in a myriad of ways. In a widely read encyclopedia article on “Ritual” published in 1968, the anthropologist Edmund Leach offered the somewhat dispiriting observation that “there is the widest possible disagreement as to how the word ritual should be used and how the performance of ritual should be understood.” At that time, there was little consensus over what ritual is or what it does, if it does anything at all. In the decades since, matters have become, if anything, even more complicated. The wagging of bees and the genuflections of a priest; wearing the colors at a football match and the coffee break at the office; hospital birth and speaking in parliament; watching television and tending the garden; waiting at a bus stop in Wichita or attending Kabuki in Tokyo; birthday parties and Fourth of July parades—all this, and more, has been conceptualized, analyzed, and theorized as ritual. Ritual, it would seem, is all around us, and reflection on the nature, function, and place of ritual in society, culture, and religion has occupied many influential thinkers in the humanities and social sciences.

Broadly conceived, as it is in this book, “ritual” is not a particular kind of discrete action, but rather a quality of action potentially available across a spectrum of behavior. Ritual, as a metacategory, includes both religious and nonreligious rites, the traditional and the new, the prescribed and the improvised, the human and nonhuman, and rubs up against a number of other cultural domains, such as play, games, performance, and theater. If ritual is action, it is also an idea, something we think with, and our exploration will move back and forth between these two dimensions.

Ritual is first and foremost a doing. Like cooking or swimming or politics, we learn about ritual through the doing of it. But alongside ritual enactment, people also step back to think, write, and read about ritual—what you are doing now. This is not to polarize action and thinking, an all-too-common move in the study of ritual. Ritual is a way of thinking and knowing. The point is simply that our ideas and feelings about ritual are shaped not only within ritual itself but also through texts and other media. The Hebrew Bible, for example, includes prescriptive ritual texts, detailing and codifying how to worship and perform sacrifice; that book also contains critical reflection on the social and moral value of those very rites. Confucian texts, in particular the *Book of Rites*, have a great deal to say about the relationship between ritual and social harmony. Travelers’ tales, missionary reports, soldiers’ journals, scholarly histories—these and other texts variously reveal fascination, disdain, and confusion in regarding the rites of others. Literature and, more recently, film, often includes ritual scenes drawn from daily life. Some literary genres even take on ritual forms: Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is a fictionalized pilgrimage, and the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the modern novel came into being through incorporating characteristics of medieval Carnival, a ritual genre that was widely suppressed across Europe in the modern era.

This book introduces a trail of thinking about ritual that is roughly a century old, a broad area of inquiry sometimes referred

to as “ritual studies.” Ritual studies emerged as a nameable field in the late 1970s and early 1980s, drawing on earlier work in ethology, anthropology, sociology, and the history and phenomenology of religions, and influenced by emerging interdisciplinary interests in such matters as performance, embodiment, authority, power, and creativity. The fundamental questions informing ritual studies are relatively straightforward: What is ritual? What does it do? Is ritual useful? What are the various kinds of ritual? Is ritual tradition bound and conservative, or creative and transformational? Answers to these fundamental questions are diverse and sometimes at odds with each other. The task here is to set down some fence posts that mark out a field of study, in the hopes that the reader will continue to graze.