

UNDERSTANDING RITUALS FOR MISSIONAL PURPOSES

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Western Christians tend to be afraid of rituals, even anti-ritual.¹ Rituals often bring to mind images of idolatry and magic, head hunting and cannibalism. In reality, most people use rituals continually. Every culture has a ritualistic script for greeting one another, whether it be a smile and a handshake, a bow, or a simple “Hi, how are you?” Rituals range from simple greetings to profoundly deep ceremonies. Rituals give content and meaning to things that are too deep for words. They point to realities greater than themselves.² The West is in danger of losing or at least minimalizing the importance of rituals. Such a loss carries with it serious consequences such as difficulty for teenagers to transition to adulthood. One study illustrates:

The absence of rites of passage leads to a serious breakdown in the process of maturing as a person. Young people are unable to participate in society in a creative manner because societal structures no longer consider it their responsibility to intentionally establish the necessary marks of passing from one age-related social role to another, such as: child to youth, youth to adult, adult to elder. The result is that society has no clear expectation of how people should participate in these roles and therefore individuals do not know what is required by society.³

Western Christians, especially missionaries, need to have a biblical understanding of rituals and their function in society. Missionaries who strip a culture of its rituals divorce reality, form, and meaning from cultural signs and reduce everything to simple verbal communication.⁴ The goal of this paper is to provide an anthropological and biblical understanding of rituals so that they might be used effectively to convey the gospel in a faithful and contextual manner while giving

¹Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 322.

²Ibid.

³Michael Karlin, "Coming of Age on the Street: Ritual Invention and the Sacred in American Gang Initiation Rituals," *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 37 (2008): 59.

⁴Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 322.

expression to the God-given forms of communication already present in the culture.

Towards an Anthropological and Biblical Understanding of Rituals

Rituals are diverse. They range from the simple such as handshakes, bowing, or hugging, to the complex with feasts, festivals, weddings, dances, pilgrimages, and so on. Rituals play a central role in many societies. They maintain social order by enacting and giving visible expression to deep cultural norms. Hiebert notes that

Rituals are culturally structured dramas that are stylized, regularly repeated, dramatically structured, authoritatively designated, and intrinsically valued (V. Turner, 1974). They communicate the deep beliefs, intense feelings (awe, sorrow, loyalty, tenderness, respect, and attraction), and values (ideal person, central moral issues) of a society through formal symbolic codes. They recreate the social, cultural, personal, and cosmic order necessary for human life by making cosmic norms explicit in visible forms.⁵

In sum, rituals act as the encyclopedia of cultural knowledge within a society.⁶ The invisible foundations of a culture are brought to the surface and given expression as to what it means to be the ideal male, female, warrior, priest, spouse, or person of God. For example, one author feels that the Scripture points to four areas an ideal man should be initiated into: warrior, wise man, lover, and king/father.⁷ The invisible worldview is the centerpiece of a culture and the ritual provides a peek into what is beneath, the visible tip of the iceberg. Put simply, rituals communicate deep cultural truths.

Rituals as Communication

A Trobriand Islander gathers select herbs and mutters to them his formula for garden

⁵Ibid., 97.

⁶Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 167.

⁷Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 124-34.

magic. He then casts the empowered herbs over his plot and walks back to his hut, satisfied that his crops will grow successfully. The purpose of this ritual is to connect with the spirit world and gain favor for a successful garden. The herbs are the channel the spoken message travels through to the spirit world.⁸ Magicians in the enemy tribe are performing other rituals in an effort to jam or overpower the first man's communication attempt with the spirits.

Many animists believe the spirits feel that words are cheap. Therefore, some effort must be made by the shamans to reinforce the sincerity of the one communicating. The ritual gives sincerity to the message. Ancient Aztecs used to draw blood from their ears and tongues and present it to the gods in order to enhance the spoken and received message.⁹ In ancient near eastern cultures one might have sex with a temple prostitute. The ritual was seen as the supernatural transmitter between the one making an offering and the god receiving it.

Nida primarily sees rituals as symbolic, especially rituals in Scripture. Ceremonial washing, keeping the Sabbath, avoiding lepers and the dead, and so on were not magic mediums for gaining power.¹⁰ Rather, they were symbolic reminders of greater truths such as the holiness of God, impending death, or the coming righteousness through Christ. Others, especially Hiebert believe that rituals in most societies are more than symbolic. They are believed to actually cause the intended action to occur. Parents name their child Strong in order to make the child so. A shaman performs a rain dance, not merely to express his desire for rain, but to actually make rain come.¹¹ The missionary must be able to distinguish how a culture views its rituals so that a proper presentation of the gospel can be made. I will give a brief explanation of common categories of rituals found worldwide and then examine how to identify and analyze rituals in a

⁸Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1960), 10.

⁹*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹Paul Hiebert, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 62-63.

particular culture.

Types of Rituals

Hiebert identifies three main categories of ritual from an anthropological perspective. These are rites of intensification, transformation, and recreation. A rite of intensification is used to publically affirm existing social and cultural order, which has become blurred by outside influence.¹² Rites of intensification are usually formal and predictable. The same prayer or chant is said every time. The ritual is done communally and is performed by recognized and set apart cultural leaders.¹³ Examples of this type of ritual include Communion, saying the Lord's Prayer, or reciting a creed in a Christian church service.

The next common kind of ritual is the rite of transformation. These rituals mark transitions in life and usually contain some sort of real or symbolic period of chaos while the transformation takes place.¹⁴ Rites of transformation are less structured and more chaotic, especially for the one going through the initiation. There is a sense of the unknown ahead. The chaos and stress of the initiation makes the initiate more likely to accept and internalize the values and norms being inculcated during the initiation.¹⁵ Rather than having one recognized leader, these rites are performed in a group setting where those involved are seen as equals. The goal is to bring about some sort of change in the one going through the ritual so that he or she becomes like the rest of the group.¹⁶ Examples of rites of transformation include birth, initiations, marriage, death, planting, harvesting, the new year, and religious pilgrimages. Transformation takes place as the old goes and the new comes.

¹²Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 98.

¹³Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 168-69.

¹⁴Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 98.

¹⁵Stephen Grunlan and Marvin Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 47.

¹⁶Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 169-70.

The last type of ritual is the rite of re-creation, sometimes called the rite of crisis. This ritual involves a rebuilding after destruction, perhaps after a village was destroyed by a tsunami. As the village is rebuilt, hidden cultural norms are brought to life and enacted in the ritual so that the ideal culture may be established. Sometimes the culture cannot be restored, however, like in many traditional societies like the Native Americans. In these cases, a ritual reenactment recreates the original desired world symbolically.¹⁷ Examples of rites of recreation include healing rituals to restore those near death and rain dances in times of drought.¹⁸ These three kinds of ritual are found worldwide, both historically and currently. These rituals are found not only in animistic cultures but can be readily identified throughout Scripture, particularly the Old Testament.

The Use of Rituals in Scripture

There are hundreds of examples of rituals in the Scriptures. Only a handful can be mentioned here because of space constraints. One finds instances where priests conducted restorative rituals in books like Ezra and Nehemiah. There are pilgrimages, special music, art, and dance that serve as rites of intensification for the Jews. Jesus followed the ritual patterns of the Old Testament such as his initiation into Jewish adulthood through his temple dedication. The dates of his death and resurrection coincide with ritualistic feasts and festivals. Certain rituals recur throughout the Old Testament such as various shaving rites. Shaving is done ritualistically and is associated with mourning, purification, humiliation, or even bringing about the surrender of an individual's power.¹⁹ Numbers 8 contains the Levitical ritual where there is washing, the putting on of new clothes, and shaving, all representing purification and

¹⁷Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 98.

¹⁸Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 157.

¹⁹Saul M. Olyan, "What Do Shaving Rites Accomplish and What Do They Signal in Biblical Ritual Contexts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1978): 611.

dedication.²⁰

Leviticus 14 describes a house cleansing ritual that animists worldwide might identify with. Two birds are used in the cleansing process. One is killed and the blood is placed in a container with fresh water. The live bird, yarn, and hyssop are dipped in the bloody water and the mixture is sprinkled on the house seven times. The live bird is then let go, into the open country. The live bird is seen as a purging agent or scapegoat, carrying away the disease from the house.²¹ Leviticus 16 describes the ritual where an actual goat is sent to the wilderness after the sins of Israel have been transferred to it by the laying on of the priest's hands.

Many Old Testament rituals find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In many ways though, the rituals function very much like those found in animistic cultures today. The rituals point to the ideal society, Israelite, king, rest, land, city, and cleansing. In the Scriptures, ritual and typology are inextricably linked. The book of Hebrews shows how many rituals now find ultimate expression in Christ. Ritual in the Scriptures is a very interesting subject but unfortunately one that cannot be fully explored here. One does not necessarily need a biblical basis for using rituals for missional purposes. Rituals exist in every culture and cannot be avoided. If rituals are to be used to communicate biblical truths more effectively, they must first be understood in their cultural contexts.

Identifying and Analyzing Rituals

Now that one has an understanding of rituals and their purpose, one needs to know how to identify and analyze rituals in cultures. Rituals may be private or cherished in a society so a degree of trust needs to be built between the research and the people before the research will be allowed to observe important rituals. Cultural researchers should view rituals as a kind of cultural shorthand. Rituals are the doorways to deeper cultural meaning and provide frameworks

²⁰Ibid., 614.

²¹Ida Zatelli, "The Origin of the Biblical Scapegoat Ritual: The Evidence of the Two Ebalite Texts," *Vetus testamentum* 48 (1998): 260.

and categories for further analyzing a society.²² Missionary anthropologist Tom Steffen advises the researcher to look for the triangulation of visual symbols, verbal stories, and physical rituals. Worldview themes will emerge when the same symbol, word, or ritual is used in various settings.²³ For example, one might discover the role of a certain powerful ancestor because he keeps appearing in various rituals.

The researcher should collect data through observation and when applicable, participant observation. Each ritual is composed of various parts or stages so the researcher should make note and attempt to discover each part's relationship to another. It is important to record kinds of speech, music, actions, objects, and other symbols used in the ritual. One must observe how space is used and where the ritual is carried out. The researcher should collect any written or oral texts related to the ritual. Finally, one must conduct ethnographic interviews with those involved in the ritual along with those observing the ritual.²⁴

After the initial observation is complete, the researcher can begin to analyze the ritual. What function does the ritual play in society? In what circumstances is the ritual used? Such questions can connect the ritual with underlying worldview issues. Several examples of burial rituals are helpful to illustrate how rituals tie into worldview. The Motilones of Columbia place bones in the fetal position so the soul can be reborn in the afterlife. Some South Pacific tribes float their dead away in a canoe on the ocean and some Tibetans burn their dead in a ritual understood to transport the person to the next life. These rituals are more than symbolic; they are seen as actually carrying out the intended action.²⁵ When properly understood, rituals can be important vehicles for communicating the gospel in a culture. The next section of this paper will

²²David Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step by Step*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1998), 27.

²³Tom Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Cross-Cultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005), 169.

²⁴Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 98-99.

²⁵Nida, *Message and Mission*, 12.

examine how to apply rituals for missional purposes.

Applying Rituals for Missional Purposes

There are many good reasons for keeping rituals in a culture. Non-literate societies store their cultural information in rituals. Stripping an oral society of its rituals is similar to burning all theological books in a Westerner's library. In addition, rituals break the monotony of everyday life and point to greater realities and provide excitement and identity.²⁶ Rituals are closely tied with the worldview of a culture. A missionary is wise to make use of rituals to communicate the gospel more effectively and transform the worldview. Because rituals are so deeply embedded in a culture, there is a real danger of syncretism when a new church continues to use former cultural rituals. In order to avoid syncretism the missionary must have an understanding of the critical contextualization process when using rituals to communicate biblical truths.

Use Critical Contextualization

Linguistic anthropologist Eugene Nida provides insight into the contextualization process with his tri-cultural model.²⁷ The model consists of the missionary's cultural background, the biblical cultural context, and the target culture's context. The Scriptures provide an unchanging framework from which to work and guides the contextualization process by providing biblical absolutes that cannot be changed such as the deity of Christ. The missionary often brings a wealth of Christian history, biblical, and anthropological training that can help answer many contextualization problems. The third point of the triangle is the input of the believers in the target culture. They best understand their culture and after talking issues through

²⁶Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 172.

²⁷Eugene Nida, *God's Word in Man's Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 45-46. See also David Hesselgrave's slight revision and added graphics accompanying Nida's model in David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 108.

with the missionary and consulting the Scriptures, can best know which rituals must go and which ones can be used for Christian purposes. The missionary can help the local pastors answer theological questions but the final decisions about which rituals to keep are best left in the hands of the pastors. It is important to allow local leaders to continue to plan and carry out rituals in order to reinforce their status as a leader.²⁸ Without contextualization, the gospel will be seen as foreign and undesirable if not unintelligible. Sills notes that “critical contextualization provides a culturally relevant understanding of the gospel, while also ensuring checks against syncretism, and it has a high regard for the authority and sufficiency of the Bible.”²⁹ Used in a biblically faithful but locally contextualized manner, rituals become key tools for transforming the worldview of the target peoples.

Use Rituals as Worldview Transformers

Rituals are communication tools. Combined with teaching methods such as Chronological Bible Storying, rituals play a key role in bringing new truth into a culture and transforming the old worldview. A missionary can utilize each of the types of rituals mentioned above to communicate truth. In certain cases, new rituals may be introduced but in other cases, current rituals can be given new meaning. Below are examples of how a missionary might use new and existing rituals to communicate biblical truths.

Introducing New Rituals

The addition of new Christian rituals happens oftentimes with the baptism of new believers. The act of baptism itself is a symbolic declaration of worldview transformation. The ritual can be expanded upon in order to add deeper meaning. For example, if a believer begins

²⁸Hiebert, *Incarnational Ministry*, 209.

²⁹David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 211.

on one side of the river, enters the water to be baptized, and then exits on the other side, the pastor can reinforce what it means to move from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God.³⁰ Such a ritual allows for the Scriptures to not only be studied with the eyes, but heard with the ears, and felt with the heart.³¹

As mentioned above, rites of intensification reaffirm cultural norms and create bonding between those participating. These rituals in a Western Christian setting include Sunday morning worship and the Christmas or Easter special services. A rite of intensification can be adopted or introduced to a culture so that believers can find group identity, especially in cultures facing persecution and pressure to revert to previous belief systems.

Adopting Existing Rituals

Other times, old cultural rituals can be given new Christian meaning. A former birth ritual might have reinforced the worldview component that the second twin must be killed because it was thought to be a demon. Rather than getting rid of the ritual, it can be replaced with one that flows out of the biblical worldview and blesses the twins as a gift from God. Likewise, funerals can show respect for ancestors but now also acknowledge the God who creates everything. Initiation rites need to be left intact otherwise young men and women will always be seen as children.

Critical contextualization must be employed when adopting existing rituals. As stated above, the local believers should have the final say in how an existing ritual can be used for Christian purposes. In general, the first generation of new believers is more prone to distance themselves from their cultural rituals because of their use for ungodly purposes. Second and third generation believers may reinitiate cultural rituals, especially rites of intensification as the believers seek to make more of a connection with their cultural heritage. It is the missionary's

³⁰Steffen, *Passing the Baton*, 126.

³¹*Ibid.*, 128.

job in all of this to give biblical and historical guidance but to leave the decisions to the nationals.

Conclusion

Rituals are worldwide phenomena. They are God given means of expression deep cultural truths. Historically, Western missionaries have been biased against using rituals in Christian worship for fear of syncretism. Recent anthropological insights have given us a better understanding of the purpose of rituals and their usefulness in communicating biblical truth. Critical contextualization provides a safeguard against syncretism. Missionaries will do well to educate themselves in the various kinds of rituals and learn how to identify and analyze them in cultures. Rituals are powerful tools for communicating biblical truths and oftentimes, actions speak louder than words.

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