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On Ritual Knowledge

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ABSTRACT:

There is evidence to suggest that the discipline of ritual studies is currently in the midst of a golden age. Apart from a variety of approaches developed during the past century, recent contributions have given us a good deal more to think about. But where, in these contemporary perspectives on ritual, lies “knowledge”? While several scholars discuss the ways in which ritual knowledge is transmitted (as in accounts of rites of passage for instance), few consider the kinds of knowledge involved in ritual and the extent to which such knowledge is shared. Who asks whether knowledge is essential to the right practice of ritual? Theodore Jennings has argued, uniquely, that ritual is fundamentally noetic, and I engage seriously with his argument here. However, there seems little doubt that theories developed by, among others, Victor Turner on liminality, Richard Schechner on performance, Catherine Bell on ritualization, Humphrey and Laidlaw on ritual commitment, Maurice Bloch on ideology, and Lindsay Jones on ritual-architectural events, in casting their gaze on other aspects of ritual, have served to complicate any straightforward understanding of what constitutes ritual knowledge through a greater emphasis on practice. My aims in this paper are, first, to shed a little light on issues relating to the position of knowledge in theories of ritual; and second, to remind colleagues that we should be wary of reducing rituals to a single quality, no matter how significant that quality might appear.

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There are a number of reasons for claiming that the study of ritual is undergoing a resurgence. Apart from multiple developments in theory and analysis, there has also been a rapid increase in the number of empirical studies of ritual, in every imaginable context. We find such studies not only in the journals of anthropology, sociology, psychology and religious studies, but of nursing, organization and management

studies, law and criminology, education, and a myriad other subjects. There are numerous conferences dealing with ritual and closely allied subjects. But above all, there is now general agreement among scholars that ritual is not merely epiphenomenal. As Bobby Alexander (1997 p.153) says, ritual shapes our experience, is central both to social change and social continuity, and is therefore generative of society and culture (See also Turner, 1969 p.117).

My point, however, is to bring us to this question: where, in these many theoretical perspectives and multiple case studies do we find a concern for “knowledge”? Here and there no doubt, but the noticeably thin treatment of this particular aspect of ritual is, in itself, worthy of consideration. I also detect an absence of the ‘K’ word in the indices of general accounts of ritual and hardly ever in studies of specific rituals. It is probably not a coincidence that just three presenters at the BASR Conference “Ritual Knowledge” (2011, held in Durham) included the term “knowledge” in the title of their paper. The fact is that during the last half century at least, scholars have not generally had much to say, explicitly, about the position of knowledge in ritual.

There are several notable exceptions, particularly among the work of anthropologists involved in the study of initiation rites. An excellent example is that Fredrik Barth’s study of Baktaman life cycle ritual (Barth, 1975). Barth (p. 11) which begins by saying:

I understand Baktaman ritual to embody a tradition of knowledge, and I wish to know what vision of Man and Cosmos it sustains, and what one needs to know and understand to participate in the communication of this knowledge.

In this sense ritual is understood primarily as a means of transmitting (or communicating), from one generation to another, the concepts that establish one’s

very identity. This knowledge includes “cosmological” knowledge – that is, the broad understanding of how the universe works, providing the context for practical knowledge – such as how to grow vegetables – which is generally acquired during non-ritual practice. However, there are rituals in which only practical knowledge is transmitted. For example, while cosmological knowledge is supported by “a meagre corpus of myth” in the Baktaman case (Barth, 1975 p. 11), myth may play a major role in ritual – or none at all. Rituals vary immensely, but it seems unlikely that knowledge figures only in those marking stages of the life cycle.

While I am primarily interested here in the various meanings of the term “ritual knowledge”, the empirical flesh on the theoretical bones will derive from ethnographic and archival fieldwork that I have undertaken during the past twenty years on British Quakerism: a non-creedal religion, which appeared in England during the mid-17th century (see also Collins 2009, 2002, 1998). Quaker ritual, ‘meeting for worship’, involves participants in sitting in a circle or hollow square for an hour on Sunday morning – in stillness and mostly silently – though one or more participants may stand and speak – usually briefly and on some more or less religious or spiritual theme. The place of worship, whether Quaker meeting house or rooms hired for the purpose, tends to be self-evidently plain -- religious symbolism is generally absent. While Quaker ritual varies considerably in structure and content from one country to another, the 478 local meetings (congregations) in the UK are extraordinarily diligent in maintaining a form that dates back to the 1650s. Indeed, Dandelion has cogently argued that while contemporary British Quakers eschew orthodoxy, their ritual can be considered orthopraxy (Dandelion 2008, 1996 pp. 283-335). I choose to focus on British Quakers for purely heuristic reasons, and would not claim that they represent a typical case (the minimalism of their ritual alone stymies that claim), or because they are in some Durkheimian sense prototypical or archetypal. Indeed, as I will continue to argue, the tendency among scholars to present a case study as

somehow 'representative' is perhaps the greatest reason for the oversimplification, overgeneralization and theoretical hegemony that sometimes diminishes contributions to ritual studies.

Ritual Theory Ritual Practice

Let us briefly consider the study of ritual within the context of one academic discipline, anthropology. There are many distinctive perspectives on ritual in anthropology: the neo-structural functionalism of Gluckman (1963, 1970), Turner, (1967, 1969, 1974, 1982), Douglas (1966) and Geertz (1973), the neo-Marxism of Maurice Bloch (1986, 1989, 2002), the dramaturgical and performative perspectives of Goffman (1972) and Schechner (1993), the significance of place and space in the conduct of ritual by Lindsay Jones (2000), and the use of cognitive theory of Boyer (1995), Atran (2002) and most recently Harvey Whitehouse (2004; see also the papers in Laidlaw and Whitehouse, eds, 2004). However, while this varied, influential and often brilliant work contributes considerably to our understanding of ritual, these scholars have relatively little to say on the significance of knowledge in ritual contexts. Another thing that these and other influential approaches notably have in common (and I could lengthen the list considerably to include scholars from other disciplines) is their representation of ritual as dynamic. This tendency is largely a result of an emphasis on action or practice, that is, on ritual as doing -- rather than on knowing.

In terms of recent theory, it is in the work of Catherine Bell (1992) along with that of Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) that we see the relevance of practice theory presented most articulately. Both wish to emphasize the dynamism of ritual, preferring (like Gluckman thirty years before) the term *ritualization* to ritual. Bell argues that ritual comprises a set of qualities found to some extent in all activities. She goes on, however, to say that the dichotomy "thought/action" that typifies much ritual study is

unhelpful, concluding “that ritualization is a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does” (1997, p. 81). The important thing, Bell avers, is that ritual is ritual by virtue of the intention of actors to frame some particular practice as ritual, thus emphasizing the importance of intention in the doing of ritual, in ritualization. But what is this thing, process, or whatever, that is intended? Bell is less clear on this point. In drawing on Bourdieu, she implies that ritual is less a matter of intention than the product of “structuring structures”, of the habitus, and that ritualization is therefore largely unconscious – and intentionless. Participants in ritual are inclined (or compelled?) to act in a particular way. But in what way, exactly?

In relation to Quaker worship, for example, is it enough to analyze the ritual merely in terms of what participants do? If that is the case then we can indeed say they are doing the same thing (sitting still and largely in silence). But when we focus on their intentions and their experience later revealed in conversation we discover that this is far from the case – they *intend* to do (and experience) all sorts of *different* things: they may pray, meditate, remember, think, plan, worry, wish; they may focus on their breathing, their posture, a text, the past week, an individual, an event, and so forth. And where does “knowledge” fit in here? Rituals, like life itself, are complicated. Some Quakers read (and know) a great deal of Quaker history, and what might loosely be called Quaker doctrine – others know next to nothing of these things and have little interest in learning more. It is possible, even, that individuals provide interpretations of Quaker worship that may, at least at first sight to the individuals involved, appear entirely incommensurable. Detailed accounts of participation in many other rituals tell the same story: knowledge of the codified aims and objectives of ritual are often patchy. And, as in much religious ritual, apart from the reasons participants may provide for doing what they do, there will also be causes, of which participants are more or less unaware (Lewis 1980, p. 218). And of course, aims and

objectives change over time: one might be out of step. For example, it is probable that a cross-section of Quakers talking about worship in 1911 would have been considerably more Christocentric in their discourse: in the past they not only do things differently but also think things differently. However, knowledge is transmitted by Quakers during worship, most overtly through spoken ministry. During the course of Quaker worship it is usual for one or more participants to stand and speak, usually briefly. Typically, these short contributions will include words of pedagogic value, often quoted directly from the quasi-canonic text *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995).

The knowledge communicated during meeting for worship is, however, of two types, one of which is foregrounded. As in the Baktaman example presented briefly above, Quaker worship, including its spatial organization primarily transmits cosmological knowledge, a broad understanding of the way the world is – or at least, can be. For example, Quakers sit in a circle and on the same level, facing towards the centre: none are raised up, nor any distinguished spatially, by dress or in any other way. This levelling arrangement strongly suggests an egalitarian universe, one in which individuals together, respond to ‘that of God’ within themselves. Their spatial organization recognizes that each person can and must communicate directly with the divine, and not through any intermediary. This is embodied knowledge, which may be supported through the use of (pedagogically inclined) spoken ministry.

Humphrey and Laidlaw in their study of the Jain puja ritual (*The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* 1994) similarly prefer to talk about ritualization: ritual is a way of doing something – which may be more or less prominent in any action. They avoid attempting a definition, but do distinguish between two polar types of ritual: *liturgy* (puja, the eucharist) and *performance* (initiation rites, shamanic rites). The key question asked of the former is: “Have we got it right?” And of the latter: “Has it worked?” Unlike Bell, however, they assume that thought and practice are

necessarily conjoined since action necessarily implies purpose. Humphrey and Laidlaw argue that ritual is a quality of action: the pivotal transformation that ritualization effects is to sever the connection between the intentions of ritual participants and the identity of the acts they perform: that is, the displacement of intentional meaning. Like Staal (1975), they are arguing that ritual (at least in its archetypal form – for example, the puja ritual in Jainism) has no intrinsic meaning. The degree of ritualization depends on the degree to which actions are felt to be stipulated. They suggest puja as an archetypal form of ritual because it entirely comprises a number of stipulated acts – and it is to these acts (and their sequence) that participants direct their complete attention. Ritual, they suggest, is not dependent on beliefs, ideas or values but is typically defined by the commitment (or acceptance) of participants. Ritual is, then, a form of discipline. The tendency of analysts to dwell on the meaning of ritual is an artefact of the intellectualism of academia. Adopting the perspective of practice theory, neither Bell, nor Humphrey and Laidlaw discuss, in any depth, the place of knowledge in ritual.

Knowledge and Ritual Knowledge

Let us begin with “knowledge” as it is generally described. We can talk about knowledge in various ways – indeed, it’s almost as elusive a concept as “ritual”. However, for heuristic reasons, I shall discuss three kinds of knowledge commonly described by and debated among philosophers and the relevance of each to our understanding of rituals. I will begin with a brief consideration of the important (though still contentious) distinction made by the British philosopher, Gilbert Ryle in his book *The Concept of Mind* (1949), between knowing that something is the case, and knowing how to do something.

First, *knowing that*, in which case a proposition or statement needs to meet three conditions (in order to constitute knowledge): I know that *x* is the case if I believe that

x is the case, if that belief is true, and if I am able adequately to justify this belief. In relation to ritual we are dealing here with the notion of efficacy, of ritual success and failure. Ritual experts will in many cases justify their practice by pointing to its evident success, and will explain failure often in terms of error, either on their own part or more often on the part of participants: the chicken to be sacrificed was the wrong kind of chicken, it was selected by the wrong person, at the wrong time, in the wrong place; its death was executed badly, by the wrong person, and so on. Similarly, it is this kind of knowledge which analysts of ritual largely depend on in presenting their accounts. In relation to liturgical ritual (including the Quaker meeting for worship) the effectiveness of the ritual is rather less of an issue, for participants at least. That's not to say that participants don't evaluate the mass they have just participated in, just that the criteria on which they make such judgements may not be transparent. Propositional knowledge is sometimes said to overlap with our second and third kinds of knowing.

Second, *knowing how*, in which to do *x* is to have the ability to do *x* – sometimes called procedural knowledge. Someone may have a skill or ability without being able to say much about it or about how to do it, knowing how to tie a shoelace, for example. In this sense, knowing something is being able to imagine, remember and recognize it. Knowing that scoring goals is important in football is different from knowing how to score them. Explaining in detail how one does such things is not so easy. It is this kind of procedural knowledge that enables us successfully to complete a task. This account of knowledge seems rather more promising for our present purposes. Ritual, as we hear from many sources is primarily about action, practice, doing. Despite his focus on knowledge, Jennings (1982), like many (if not most) other contemporary scholars, begins by emphasizing the importance of action or practice in the interpretation of ritual, "Ritual is above all a pattern of action" (Jennings 1982, p. 111). Quakers know how to do meeting for worship – possibly by reading accounts

of the ritual, but more probably through gaining confidence by imitating others over the course of time. As Dandelion (2008) has argued, in recent decades (and maybe for considerably longer than that) Quakerism is more a matter of orthopraxy than orthodoxy – that the one thing that remains shared is the doing of meeting for worship. In the Quaker case at least, -doxy is eclipsed by -praxy. As I mentioned earlier, to ask a Quaker “What do you do in meeting?” will be to elicit a wide range of responses. Some will refer to what they do with their body, others what they do with their minds, still others foreground mood or emotions. In any case, they vary considerably in their accounts. Even when they appear to be doing the same thing, Quakers, during worship, are not doing the same thing. In various other contexts, practical knowledge might not be so easy to come by – as in Vedic ritual as described by Staal (1979), for example. And in many other cases where responsibility for organizing and even performing ritual is delegated to one or more experts, the majority of participants may have little or no knowledge of how a particular ritual is conducted.

Third, *acquaintance knowing*, first discussed at length by Russell (1912), refers to personal knowledge of something or someone. Let us take as a case, the Bemba female coming of age ritual “chisungu” (Richards 1956). I can know that there is a ritual called chisungu, and know various facts about it, and yet not know chisungu. To know the ritual I must at least be able to recognize it, and I get to know it better as my direct involvement increases. Knowing chisungu well includes knowing facts about it but is not restricted to that alone. An important aspect of this kind of knowledge is that it is more obviously sensual – one can know, in this way, by intuition, touch, smell, sound, and so forth.

Each of these three accounts of knowledge is relevant to any consideration of ritual. We may, of course, find that descriptive or propositional knowledge, the primary

concern of epistemology, is actually more or less irrelevant in the case of a particular ritual, but wouldn't it be best to begin with the assumption that the account at least *might* be relevant? And indeed at least one serious attempt has been made to make "knowledge" relevant in relation to each of these modes. Theodore Jennings argues persuasively in his paper, *On Ritual Knowledge* (1982), that ritual far from being a meaningless activity, as Frits Staal and others have suggested, "is one of many ways in which human beings construe and construct their worlds" (p. 112). For this reason in particular, we can assume that ritual "performs noetic functions in ways peculiar to itself" (p. 112; see also p. 124). For Jennings, knowledge is embodied and practical in ritual. He identifies three "moments" of noetic function in ritual. First, ritual action as a means of coming to know, of gaining knowledge. In this sense, ritual is a means of discovery and exploration. I have referred to this above both in relation to Baktaman and Quaker ritual, as the assimilation of cosmological knowledge. In describing ritual action as a means of gaining knowledge, or as a process of coming to know, Jennings argues that this is possible only because ritual is dynamic and open to variation, a "mode of inquiry and discovery". This kind of knowledge is gained by and through the body, through action rather than by passive observation or contemplation; and finally such knowledge is gained through engagement with the ritual, rather than through detachment, even if the knowledge gained is only of the ritual itself. Second, Jennings agrees that ritual as a means of transmitting knowledge – the pedagogical function of ritual which teaches us, for example to know our place in society, to distinguish right from wrong, to hunt more efficiently and so forth. According to Jennings, these two initial moments of ritual knowledge suggest that ritual neither merely dramatizes nor illustrates existing knowledge, but, rather, "ritual action transmits the "knowing" gained through ritual action itself" (p.113). Finally, Jennings argues that ritual performance can be understood as the objectification of knowledge – the theoretical-critical understanding of ritual as achieved by observers: "Precisely to the degree that rituals serve noetic functions, to

that degree we may gain epistemological access to them, without violating their basic character” (Jennings, 1982, pp. 112). This latter point is particularly interesting in that Jennings offers the possibility of integrating the perspectives of “insider” and “outsider” in understanding particular rituals.

It is telling that several scholars who have declined the temptation to try and define ritual, have suggested that we simply know it when we see it – we recognize a ritual for what it is and call it “ritual”. Similarly, Quakers appear to know (Quaker) worship when they see it: they expect it to happen at a particular time and in a pre-ordained place, and to take a certain form. Finding themselves in this place at this time they are aware that others are doing the same thing – (sitting down quietly). This seemingly simple though really quite complex process (coming to meeting) is undertaken both consciously and unconsciously. For example, when asked why they sit in a particular place, one might reveal that they feel comfortable and “right” only when they sit beside Sarah and Laura, both of whom share her love of music and sing in the same choir. Another always occupies the chair which provides the best view of the cherry tree that grows right outside the large window, “it helps focus the mind” – and so on and so forth. Such explanations suggest that participants know how to feel “right” in meeting, and make a conscious effort to ensure that this is accomplished. Another might respond that they have no idea why they sit where they do. But is it true to say that the observer or the participant knows a ritual better the more facts they have collected relating to it? I have a pretty clear idea of what it means to “know of” a ritual, but what does it mean to “know” a ritual? Is it primarily a matter of expertise or skill? Does it relate to being able to explain a ritual, to reveal its symbolic meaning, or present a detailed account of its history? Perhaps, but then the absence of this kind of expertise does not prevent people participating successfully in rituals. On the other hand, the ritual itself might specify a certain level

of expertise (including propositional knowledge) in order for it to be performed correctly, or at all.

Jennings, as a systematic theologian, is unusual in taking ritual so seriously and his work contributes significantly to ritual studies in attempting to tackle the “knowledge” issue head on. He largely avoids the trap of over-generalization in that whilst he clearly believes that rituals are noetic, he is aware that they may also be (and do) many other things.

The Occlusion of Knowledge in Accounts of Ritual

If it is true that knowledge rarely figures in accounts of ritual, why is this the case? I can think of four likely reasons. In the first place, the simple and probably simplistic claim that just as knowledge of lion taming is not lion taming, knowledge of ritual is not ritual. Of course, you might say that it is impossible to strip “knowledge” out of practice, since practice implies knowledge: consider the expression ‘We know what to do.’ In that case we need to consider carefully the relationship between knowledge and practice. Practice theorists, such as Bourdieu for instance, sometimes argue that we can never be sure that an individual “knows” what to do in any sense other than they are able to do what they do. In those instances, “knowledge” can do little more than intrude into a practice theory of ritual, since it does so little analytical work. A second reason for this emphasis on practice (or action) in ritual studies is that it reflects the ambient climate of theoretical work in the social sciences, and particularly in sociology and anthropology. Practice theory is a popular though less than unified response to the failings of post-structuralism, and the continued struggle to deal satisfactorily with the common dualities (such as object/subject individual/society, self/other). It also provides a welcome antidote to approaches that are overly abstract and/or critical. Practice theory serves, some say, to reconnect the analyst with the analysand – focusing at best, on what actual people actually do. Third, the tendency,

since the early twentieth century to uncouple ritual from myth has further diminished the explicit role of knowledge in ritual analysis. Finally, it might just be the case that complex social phenomena such as ritual are best understood through a practice theory approach. A contentious claim, but if I were forced to attempt a defence, I might begin by arguing that practice theory is most amenable to a polysemic approach, which I believe is valuable in the case of social phenomena as complex and multifaceted as ritual (Collins 2005). Whatever the reasons for the omission of “knowledge” as a component of ritual, the result is the diminution of our understanding of social phenomena.

Concluding Remarks

My aim in this paper is twofold. First, I have identified a lack of interest in the knowledge component of ritual, and reasons why this might be the case. Ritual knowledge is a complex subject and I have indicated a few of the reasons why we should address this lack. Secondly, I have tried and make clear the value of adopting an inclusive approach in the analysis of ritual. I have arrived at this position after finding that rituals even as apparently minimalistic or thin as unprogrammed Quaker worship can be illuminated in one way or another through the adoption of a variety of perspectives. Why? Because rituals, are multifaceted, or put simply, rituals are complicated. A ritual may involve one or many individuals, who may (either implicitly or explicitly) come together (though not necessarily in the same place or at the same time) in order to do the same thing – even though they may end up doing quite different things. A ritual may be unique (and there is a sense in which every ritual is bound to some extent to be unique) or part of a series. A ritual may involve all participants similarly, may demand specialized roles, and may incorporate those who would prefer not to be involved at all. A ritual may include secular and/or sacred elements. Rituals are necessarily embodied, and are also more or less cognitive and emotional – and may or may not be marked or framed as rituals, Rituals

communicate to varying degrees and in various ways, and so on and so forth (Collins 2009b). Jennings' paper (1982) is notable for its justification for taking ritual knowledge seriously. Moreover, Jennings not only demonstrates the significance of knowledge in ritual but in avoiding too narrow a focus, he escapes the errors caused by over-generalization (1982, p. 112):

An inquiry into the noetic functions of ritual does not entail the view that such an approach will prove exhaustive of the "meaning" of ritual. It is not necessary at this point to debate the relative importance of playful, habitual, diversionary, or other possible aspects of ritual activity. It is enough for my thesis to claim that noetic functions do characterize rituals to some degree, allowing that other functions may even predominate in some examples of ritual action.

Scholars less cautious than Jennings often go too far in privileging one or other aspect of ritual – sometimes because this characteristic is predominant in the particular ritual they study, sometimes because of an axe they are bent on grinding. To present any one aspect of ritual as the key component of ritual in this way is rather like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. This sleight of hand merely serves to make invisible those several other qualities that may be equally significant in our understanding either of particular rituals or of rituals more generally. It is rather less helpful to begin one's analysis by saying, "I'm just going to ignore A, B, C, E, and F – and *then* you'll see how important D is"!

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