

**RITUAL AND THE SACRED:  
A NEO DURKHEIMIAN ANALYSIS OF POLITICS,  
RELIGION AND THE SELF**

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Reading 'Ritual and the Sacred' is somewhat like stepping into a delicate machine, kaleidoscope-like, which works to alter one's perspective on modern society. A sense of urgency suffuses the text; social life is fragile, modernity is tragic, and we need to change the way we live. Rosati argues that ritual and the sacred are vital concepts for understanding modernity, and that religion should be a resource for making whole our common world. We take a certain understanding of religion and social life 'for granted,' and hence it makes little sense to us when those who hold a differing vision come into conflict with our own. Rosati is sensitive to the potential for distortion in looking to religion for answers, when religion is not itself a bed of roses. However there are, he argues, two reasons why we should do so. The first is somewhat anthropological; we can learn how religion and the sacred help society work, how they contribute to social solidarity. The second is fairly historico-religious; given that religions seem to cause such trouble for modernity, it seems likely that they will be part of any solution to its ills. The aim then, is not to regress to some archaic antediluvian idyll, but rather to show that the expression of 'traditional cultural values and practices' might help shape a more successful modern society. How might this be so? Emile Durkheim is the spirit invoked to guide us on our quest for answers, and whose much interpreted message is also the point of departure. Durkheim is deemed precious in his assertion that modern society must learn from past societies, that modernity is fragile and somewhat tragic, and that we can find some answers in religion.

We are told the story then, of the changing Self. The oft repeated (though not always self-evident?) narrative of an increasingly introspective, independent self, an 'introspective conscience'. In this story, transcendence is gradually replaced with transcendental reason as ultimate authority, and this is called modernity's wager. Rosati argues that the excision of religion in modernity belies its continuing importance and partly explains the difficulties modernity has had in dealing with it. Rituals are still present in modern life, but they are unacknowledged, running silent. Rituals and the sacred should be forces that bind social and individual life together, and their weakened state is responsible for the discontinuity between these spheres. The argument is now fundamentally about morality. Ritual is counterpoised against a procedural account of morality, where what matters is the right, sociality mattering little, and identified with a morality where what matters is fundamentally the good, where sociality matters a lot. Ritual is identified as key to moral development and the practice of morality. Some

ritual we already do, some we should discover again and use in conjunction with non-ritual aspects of education. Two examples of cultural ethics are given, Confucianism, and rabbinic Judaism. In both, the cultivation of the Self is paramount, which means connecting with a community of other people through ritual. Ritual shapes shared meanings, and is key to developing the capacity of judgement. Judgement, how we respond to situations, comes out of a ritual training that is most of all symbolic. Rosati cites Seligman (Seligman 2008), in that telling a child to say 'please' and 'thank you' when she asks for butter is a way of getting her to say it in other contexts, a way of establishing 'a web of meaning' connecting disparate situations. Actions become ritualistic, even in non-ritual settings, and this is how humans come to respond well. Rituals then are not opposite to individual judgement, not its end; rather subjection to ritual is a means to an expansion and shaping of the Self in a social existence.

Satisfied that the importance of ritual for moral social life has been established, Rosati then moves on to shake up a modern liberal view of politics by looking through the anthropological lens. We should understand that a liberal ideal is not the basis of politics in most of the world. Utilising the concept of the 'cybernetics of the sacred' introduced by Rappaport (e.g. Rappaport, 1999), politics becomes one mechanism among many for the regulation of social life, and has no special status by itself. The aim of this discussion is very practical. To put politics on supports more reasonable to those who don't share liberal ideals, and to make a vision of politics more 'realistic.' The discussion ends with an evaluation of different models of government, differing ways of redistributing governance to communities and of constituting laïcité. The argument then moves to finding a basis in religion for 'principled tolerance' and the techniques for doing so, including Scriptural Reasoning (SR). SR is a means for religions to find shared ground through working together with sacred texts, reading and discussing them as a kind of ritual act. Here a peace is envisioned both now, through a mutually respectful public conversation, and also more distant, a universal peace accepting of difference. The book ends by invoking Durkheim, and so we end as we began.

A clearly brilliant work, sometimes 'Ritual and the Sacred' seems to slip into an almost theological concern with the reinterpretation of scholarly texts; the title itself is a warning of this. However nuanced and detailed a work so closely engaged with texts might be, one can't help wondering if the real world is not sometimes overlooked altogether as the scholar bends over his books, especially when we are talking about something so important as how we should live. For example, 'Ritual and the Sacred' picks up the familiar story of the development of the modern self, but is it really true that moderns have a fundamentally different concept of the self from people of previous ages and differing cultures? As we know, the accounts of Mauss and Dumont are highly literate, elaborate stories, but how much do they really influence the proverbial man in the street (or in the cave)?

On a related note, as we have seen, morality plays a key role in the analysis. The argument that ethics should not simply be procedural and de-contextualised, but also grounded in social life is of concern in the study of morality more generally. A growing movement in moral psychology is concerned with these questions, and Durkheim is invoked here too, as Haidt has shown (Haidt 2008). Perhaps there is an opportunity for talking across disciplines.

Slightly disquieting is the emphasis on ritual education for learning 'judgement,'

which seems to leave out other ways in which humans come to respond to their environment. A somewhat contrary viewpoint to that of ritually learned judgement, is that intuitions are rather more important than conscious deliberation when we make moral choices, and that such intuitions are shaped by evolution. We then make largely post-hoc justifications for our moral intuitions (de Waal 2006). Of course we should not be 'reductionist' in the negative sense of excluding all else, but such processes very likely inform morality.

It would be interesting to read 'Ritual and the Sacred' alongside works that deal with the evolutionary story of religion. For example, if Rosati claims that religion should be a resource for improving society, David Sloan Wilson has recently posed such an aim within an evolutionary framework (Wilson 2002). 'Ritual and the Sacred' is rich and fascinating, and carries an important message, so it would be great if people from different disciplines could pick it up, and relate it to their field.

'Ritual and the Sacred' will be much discussed, and welcomed by all those interested in finding solutions to the problems of social life in the contemporary world. A rather brilliant and intricate work that will be read and re-read, with the laudable aim of helping people get along together, it seems to me at its heart a moral treatise. Stepping out of this kaleidoscopic work, my mind is abuzz but I also feel slightly unquiet. It is easy to call the dream of one human community naïve, but on this tiny ball of rock we call home, in the face of a rather huge and unknown and fairly cold universe, before we do so we might want to ask, is this naivety something we really want to give up on quite yet; a savage hope perhaps, we should not relinquish?

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