

Ritual Theories, the Sacred, and Social Control. A commentary on *Three Wishes for the World* by Harvey Whitehouse

Karl Frost

University of California Davis

I am quite enthusiastic about Whitehouse's research program, an impressive body of empirical work in a variety of cultural contexts and using multiple methods, exploring diverging modes of religiosity and ritual practice and their implications for social structure. I'm delighted to have been asked to respond to his post.

I find Whitehouse's divergent modes hypothesis of ritual function and social structure both intuitively reasonable and well supported. There are a lot of complexities still to be explained, but a good start has been made on what is likely to be a long and fruitful research project. I'll confine my response to this specific post to three points. The first, an expansion of something I wrote in response to an earlier post on this blog, which is to address the problematic nature of the rather loose term 'ritual' as used historically by anthropologists and to assert that 'causally opaque' is not a useful definition of 'ritual'. The second is to suggest an expansion of the divergent modes of religiosity program to include synthesis with the study of how people behave and make decisions around values constructed as 'sacred'. The final point I would like to make is actually a word of caution around the development of more sophisticated techniques of social control. Whitehouse presents here a positive picture of how this knowledge could be applied without addressing how different actors with different access to power and different motivations might use such knowledge for other ends than the public good.

As I began my own research on 'ritual' at UC Davis, I immediately came up against the problem of definition with which many others have wrestled. I find it hard to argue that the anthropological record is coherent around the definition of the term 'ritual', except perhaps the Durkheimian idea of those things that we Westerners don't know how to explain through obvious material/economic purpose.

'Ritual' is a folk category. It is a box in which we lump all sorts of interesting behaviors which grab our attention, yet whose purpose is not materially obvious to ourselves, the anthropologists doing the studying. It is like the kitchen junk drawer in which you put all sorts of things that you don't already have a place for. There are a lot of interesting things in the junk drawer, but their only relation to each other is that they don't fit in our other tidy categories... they are 'causally

Corresponding author's e-mail: culturalvariant@gmail.com

Citation: Frost, Karl. 2013. Ritual Theories, the Sacred, and Social Control. A commentary on *Three Wishes for the World* by Harvey Whitehouse. *Cliodynamics* 4.2: 307–313.

opaque' to us. As such, I don't think there is much hope for some sort of general theory of 'ritual' per se. Some researchers find a functional role for ritual in the formation and stability of groups at different scales (Atkinson & Whitehouse, 2011)(Barth, 1990)(McNeill, 1995)(Sosis & Bressler, 2003)(McElreath, Boyd, & Richerson, 2003), others assert that rituals destabilize large hierarchical structures (Ehrenreich, 2007), others demonstrate how rituals store locally specific functional ecological knowledge (Lansing & Kremer, 1993)(Rappaport, 1967), yet others find ritual to cause cognitive dysfunction (Legare & Souza, 2012), and on and on. They are all perhaps correct, but this is arguably because they have drawn distinct objects out of the conceptual box we call 'ritual'. There are a lot of interesting objects in this box, but I suspect it is going to be much more fruitful to then explore theories of the different, specific social 'objects' in this box than to try to argue for a general theory of those things which are causally opaque to the anthropologist performing the study. While Whitehouse still refers to this definition, I actually think it is one of the interesting things about his research program that it begins to differentiate objects in the box based on features other than opacity to the researcher. For example, as Atkinson and Whitehouse get more specific about euphoric/dysphoric activities, frequency, arousal level, they find correlations in the ethnographic literature between low frequency and high arousal 'rituals' and small scale societies and between high frequency low arousal rituals and larger scale societies. Getting similarly more specific, McNeil and also Kirschner and Tomasello (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010) find that synchronized rhythmic activity leads to increased prosociality (likely in-group limited). This will be entirely unrelated to the social or psychological effects of an augury ritual that does not involve synchronized movement, like drawing a card from a deck and reflecting on one's life in relationship to its imagery. We find both activities in the folk category of 'ritual', but there isn't much more that unifies them except the common perception of their mysterious function from the perspective of a cultural outsider.

The category 'ritual' reflects less on the unity of the phenomena in the category than on the cognitive biases of those creating the category, Heinrich et al's WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) people (Heinrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). WEIRD people, who have dominated not just anthropology, but western academia in general, are psychologically shaped by a culturally novel mythology of radical individualism which perhaps renders opaque the social psychology of many different activities, which to others may be obvious from both internal experience and observed patterns of behavior in their communities. To whom, if anyone, is the activity supposed to be 'causally opaque' to be called a ritual? Is the causal opacity somehow necessary for the function?

A perhaps more fundamental problem with trying to find a theory of 'ritual' using this definition of 'obscurity of function' as one's definition is that the behavior of interest might not be confined to the box. For example, McNeil points out that some synchronized rhythmic activities, like folk dances or certain religious practices, have no clear economic purpose to the outsider (and thus tend to be called 'rituals'), but others are parts of functional economic activity, like Japanese fishermen rhythmically pulling in a net or military drills. Their purpose to an outsider is causally clear, but they have the same psychological effects as the more causally opaque variants. One might say that there is a layering of the obvious and the obscure with the fishermen, however the fishermen are likely quite aware of the social effects of their activities... it is hard to miss from the inside, the experience of camaraderie that comes with team work. As McNeil points out, the social function of the close order drill has certainly been clear to military professionals who continued its use well past the point in history when it's material training function was no longer relevant.

One could point to many groups who use synchronized activities with no sense of 'obscurity of purpose', very intentionally using the practice to bond groups. Modern military drills, Native American powwow or potlatch dances, and allegiance-forming dance events in Papua New Guinea are a few quick examples. Goebbels' social choreography at Nuremberg was certainly not causally opaque to Goebbels, but was done quite explicitly with an understanding of group formation. It was also probably not causally opaque to those involved, and many are struck in a visceral way with an obviousness of social function when watching Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. 'Ritual' is best seen as a conceptual grab bag in which we can find specific behaviors like high arousal dysphoric activities or synchronized rhythmic activities to study and about which to create social and psychological theories. I suspect that a general theory of ritual is bound to either fail or not be usefully specific in its predictions. Whitehouse has demonstrated that theories of high arousal dysphoric activities and low arousal, repetitive activities have significant promise.

The second point I would like to make is a suggestion of what may turn out to be a very useful research question: how do different ritual forms bring participants to categorize specific rhetorical stances or norms as 'sacred'? When something is seen as 'sacred' people's behavior in relation to that thing becomes qualitatively different from other contexts: behavior becomes more unbending (Rappaport, 1999). Where the 'profane' may be subject to tradeoffs and negotiation, conflicts around the sacred potentially become irreconcilable, or at least not subject to normal notions of economic trade-offs (Atran, 2010). In today's world, we see many politically important examples where different groups' notions of the sacred

come into conflict, causing violent conflict and a consequent entrenching of stances.

While we are beginning to understand how 'sacredness' affects decision-making and negotiation, we have hardly begun to look at how a notion of the sacred arises in the first place. I suspect that there will be some very fruitful explorations in the next years that will help shed light on how people become bonded not just to other people but to ideas. As Whitehouse writes about 'fusing with a belief system' and how 'routinization seems to suppress reflection, in effect producing more slavish conformity to group norms', it is very easy to extrapolate to the manufacturing of the sacred through a synthesis of group ritual and rhetoric. Sacred values are characterized by an unquestionability, an inhibition of critically reflection. If we can find empirical support for the idea that specific kinds of routinization lead to suppression of reflection (and perhaps this already exists in the research of Whitehouse and his colleagues), we may have the beginning of an understanding of the dynamics of sacredness.

Finally, I would like to complicate Whitehouse's picture of where an increase in technical understanding of social control might bring us. I appreciate Whitehouse's bold assertion of the possible good of this research, as he presents a vision of the science of ritual leading to a better society. I feel motivated by a similar vision. However, I personally proceed cautiously, knowing that as I generate knowledge through public institutions, I relinquish control over who has access to that power. While I think that the attempt to derive practical, applied understandings of the social function of rituals is going to be challenging, the potential success of the endeavor gives me as much pause as the potential failure. Whitehouse writes about the prevention of civil war, but sometimes a civil war is initiated to overthrow a tyrant. Using an understanding of the social function of ritual to disrupt group bonding in order to prevent civil war resembles a picture of an oppressive government achieving greater social control as much as it does one of a benevolent society inhibiting dysfunctional fissioning. Something similar could be said for the use of group bonding ritual by those in power to consolidate group commitment to an oppressive, authoritarian state. Goebbels is certainly a clear self-aware historical example of the latter. The Cointelpro program of the FBI in the United States, used to disrupt civil rights, anti-war, and socialist groups, is an example of the former. Where would civil rights be in the US, now, if the FBI had applied more effective tools than they did for disrupting social organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Martin Luther King Jr? We aspire to a kind of benign, collaborative social engineering as we increase public knowledge of the social effects of ritual, but we should understand that this knowledge will be applied by the different political actors, potentially for cross purposes.

It is sometimes perhaps an academic fantasy that one's social science research will have some sort of potential application in the world, but to earn our public paychecks, it behooves us to act as if it will. However, we have every reason to suspect that any functionally useful knowledge we produce, should we succeed in producing it, will be used asymmetrically by people in positions of power to consolidate their power. We should not proceed blindly forward guided by rosy fantasies of how benevolent governments will use power purely for the public good. If we do have an intention of generating knowledge of socio-political dynamics in order to facilitate the public good, we have to think about how that understanding might be used by existing institutions and specifically aim for the development of social techniques that are structurally constrained from being utilized for oppressive purposes (Sharp, 2002). Some of the organizing strategies of the Arab Spring may be a beginning, but obviously as we look to Libya and the fallout into Mali, we aren't there yet.

References

- Atkinson, Q. D., & Whitehouse, H. (2011). The cultural morphospace of ritual form: Examining modes of religiosity cross-culturally. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 32(1), 50–62.
- Atran, S. (2010). *Talking to the Enemy*. New York: Harper Collins
- Barth, F. (1990). The Guru and the Conjuror: Transactions in Knowledge and the Shaping of Culture in Southeast Asia and Melanesia. *Man, New Series*, 25(4), 640–653.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2007). *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*. Metropolitan Books.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *The Behavioral and brain sciences*, 33(2-3), 61–83; discussion 83– 135. doi:10.1017/S0140525X0999152X
- Kirschner, S., & Tomasello, M. (2010). Joint music making promotes prosocial behavior in 4-year-old children. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 31(5), 354–364. doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2010.04.004
- Lansing, J. S., & Kremer, J. N. (1993). Emergent Properties of Balinese Water Temple Networks: Coadaptation on a Rugged Fitness Landscape. *American Anthropologist*, 95(1), 97–114.
- Legare, C. H., & Souza, A. L. (2012). Evaluating ritual efficacy. Cognition. McElreath, R., Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J. (2003). Shared Norms and the Evolution of Ethnic Markers. *Current Anthropology*, 44(1), 122–130. doi:10.1086/345689
- McNeill, W. H. (1995). Keeping together in time: Dance and drill in human history (p. 258). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ Pr. Rappaport, R. (1967).

Frost: Commentary on Harvey Whitehouse. Cliodynamics 4.2 (2013)

Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations among a New Guinea People.
Ethnology, 1, 17–30.

Rappaport, R. (1999). *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sharp, G. (2002). *From Dictatorship to Democracy*. The Albert Einstein Institution.

Sosis, R., & Bressler, E. R. (2003). Cooperation and Commune Longevity : A Test of the Costly Signaling Theory of Religion. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 37, 211–239.