

Review Essay

VICTOR TURNER'S THEORY OF RITUAL

by Robert A. Segal

Abstract. Like Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas, Victor Turner considers religion the key to culture and ritual the key to religion. Like them as well, he interprets religion the way believers purportedly do: as beliefs, as beliefs about the cosmos, yet as cosmic beliefs compatible with modern science. Ritual serves to express those cosmic beliefs—not for the scientific purpose of explaining or controlling the cosmos but for the existential purpose of giving human beings a place in it. Ritual serves simultaneously to express beliefs about society—not only for the functionalist purpose of keeping human beings in their social place but also for the existential purpose of giving them a social place.

Among contemporary anthropologists few, if any, have devoted themselves more passionately to religion than Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner.¹ Conversely, few, if any, contemporary anthropologists concerned with religion have been more enthusiastically received within religious studies than they.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND RELIGION

The interest of Geertz, Douglas, and Turner in religion reflects in part that of their antagonists, who are largely their predecessors. To best them the three must meet them on their own prime grounds. Religion provides the three with perhaps the strongest case for their basic view that beliefs motivate human beings. Religion offers strong evidence because, even in the face of some of their opponents' interpretations, it seems to be composed primarily of beliefs. Where other areas of life like kinship and economics obviously presuppose beliefs, religion seems to be a set of beliefs per se. Religious beliefs seem, moreover, to

Robert A. Segal is a lecturer in the Western Culture Program, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305.

[*Zygon*, vol. 18, no. 3 (September 1983).]

© 1983 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0044-5614

be among the most deeply held of all beliefs. Because they matter so much to human beings, they demonstrate the power of beliefs for them.

As well disposed toward religion as Geertz, Douglas, and Turner are, "religionists" are no less well disposed toward them. It is not, first, the importance of religion for the three which accounts for their popularity. Since the beginnings of their disciplines anthropologists, together with other social scientists, have been preoccupied with religion. Certainly Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Émile Durkheim, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Bronislaw Malinowski, among classical social scientists, have considered religion at least as important as Geertz, Douglas, and Turner do.² Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung have considered it nearly as important.³

For Marx, Freud, and Jung, religion serves only a temporary function: it exists for Marx only as long as human beings are economically oppressed; for Freud, only as long as they are sexually repressed; for Jung, only as long as they are spiritually unconscious. For Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, and Malinowski, by contrast, religion serves a permanent, outright indispensable function: for Tylor, that of explaining the world; for Frazer, that of controlling it; for Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, and Malinowski, that of preserving society. Only for Durkheim, to be sure, is religion indispensable to the serving of its function: for him alone religion not simply preserves society but is necessary to its preservation. For Geertz, Douglas, and Turner, however, only the function served by religion is indispensable.

It is not, second, the positiveness of their view of religion which has gained the three their academic hospitality either. Marx and Freud may consider religion harmful to both individuals and society, but all the other classical social scientists noted consider it helpful. They consider it at least as helpful as Geertz, Douglas, and Turner do.

It is not, third, the truth of religion for Geertz, Douglas, and Turner which explains their appeal to religionists. On the one hand the social sciences by nature examine only the origin and function, not the truth, of religion. When they invoke the origin or function of religion to determine its truth, they commit the genetic fallacy or its functionalist equivalent. On the other hand the theories of none of the three actually do presuppose the truth of religion, whatever the religious convictions of Geertz, Douglas, and Turner themselves.

It is the autonomy of religion for the three which has above all endeared them to religionists. They venture far closer than any of their predecessors to the nonreductionistic ideal of religionists: that of understanding religion in its own, irreducibly religious terms rather than in terms of other phenomena or disciplines. They view religion as a set

of beliefs, not just practices or feelings; as a set of beliefs about the cosmos, not just about society or man; yet as a set of cosmic beliefs compatible with modern science.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND RELIGIOUS RITUAL

Geertz, Douglas, and Turner are commonly concerned not only with the irreducibly religious nature of religion but also with the same aspect of religion: ritual. As nonreductionists, the three might be expected to concentrate on creeds or myths rather than rituals, which, as physical activities rather than mere beliefs, might seem more prone to reductionism. But they do not. Instead, they interpret ritual as primarily a mental activity, as an expression of belief.

Within the social sciences there have been two main views of ritual, which here means religious ritual. One view has considered it basically a matter of feelings, which ritual either implants or releases. This view, by far the more common one, is found above all in Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, Marx, Freud, and Jung.⁴ For Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, ritual creates feelings: for both, feelings of dependence on society and, additionally for Radcliffe-Brown, feelings of love and hatred toward phenomena which respectively help and hurt society. For Malinowski, Marx, Freud, and Jung, ritual discharges feelings: for Malinowski, feelings of helplessness before nature; for Marx, pent-up economic desires; for Freud and Jung, pent-up psychic ones.

The other main view of ritual has deemed it fundamentally a matter of belief, which ritual applies. This view is found above all in Tylor and Frazer.⁵ For both, ritual controls the world by applying prescientific beliefs about it.

Like Tylor and Frazer, Geertz, Douglas, and Turner regard ritual as belief.⁶ Unlike them, the three regard ritual as the expression, not the application, of belief. Even more unlike them, they regard the belief expressed as other than primitive science. For Tylor and Frazer, ritual is the primitive equivalent of applied science: for the purpose of controlling the world it puts into practice the primitive belief that personal gods rather than impersonal laws of nature regulate the world. For both Tylor and Frazer, not just ritual but religion as a whole, of which ritual is only a part, gives way to modern science.

For Geertz, Douglas, and Turner, by contrast, ritual in particular and religion in general are universal, not merely primitive, phenomena. They can be universal exactly because they do not rival science and so do not get superseded by it. Rather than either explaining or controlling the world, ritual, for all three, serves to give human

beings a place in it. Ritual does so by conveying information: by describing that place.

Ritual, and religion as a whole, serve to give human beings a place in not just the cosmos but also society. Indeed, they serve above all to fuse those places. They do so by at once conferring cosmic sanctions on social norms and validating those cosmic convictions through social practices. On the one hand society becomes part of the cosmos, which thereby both explains and justifies it. On the other hand the cosmos gets manifested through society, which thereby verifies it.

As concerned as Geertz, Douglas, and Turner are with the intellectual side of ritual, they also are concerned with its social side. As resolutely as they reject their "emotivist" predecessors for denying the intellectual side of ritual, they follow those emotivists, Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown above all, for whom the function served by creating or releasing emotion is social rather than psychological. For all three assert that ritual, and religion in general, serve to uphold society as well as to give human beings places in both it and the cosmos. The social and intellectual functions of ritual coincide. For in granting cosmic sanctions to social norms ritual is upholding those norms as well as integrating them with the cosmos.

TURNER'S THEORY OF RELIGIOUS RITUAL

The Drums of Affliction typifies Turner's approach to ritual.⁷ He begins by defining ritual as a process of communication: it serves "the highly important functions . . . of storing and transmitting information. . . ."⁸ Ritual is thus not simply "instrumental" but "expressive." It does not simply do something but says something. It does not simply say something for the sake of doing something but says something for its own sake. The information conveyed by ritual may well effect matters, but ritual still functions to convey information itself. To say that *myth* functions to convey information is commonplace. To say that ritual does is not.

The kind of information conveyed by ritual is religious, not secular: "We are not dealing with information about a new agricultural technique or a better judicial procedure: we are concerned here with the crucial values of the believing community, whether it is a religious community, a nation, a tribe, a secret society, or any other type of group whose ultimate unity resides in its orientation towards transcendental and invisible powers."⁹ This information is neither a vehicle nor a disguise for social or psychological information, let alone for social or psychological feelings. It is irreducibly religious. Conveying it is not a means to a social or psychological end but the end itself.

Turner specifically opposes Freud's view of ritual. The view he opposes is not, however, the conventional Freudian one of *Totem and Taboo* and "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," in which ritual serves to discharge repressed sexual feelings.¹⁰ It is, rather, the more existential one of *The Future of an Illusion* and the last of the *New Introductory Lectures*, in which ritual, or religion generally, serves to effect the illusory belief that human beings are one with the world and thus secure in it.¹¹ To the contrary, suggests Turner, ritual simply expresses the belief, which, moreover, stems from humans' actual experience of unity with the world: "to my mind it seems just as feasible to argue that 'the wish to gain control of the sensory world' may proceed from something else—a deep intuition of a real and spiritual unity in all things. It may be a wish to overcome arbitrary and man-made divisions, to overcome for a moment . . . the material conditions that disunite men and set them at odds with nature."¹² Turner is saying not that the belief in unity with the world is true but that its function is irreducibly religious rather than psychological.

The Drums of Affliction focuses on Ndembu rituals of affliction: rituals performed on behalf of persons whose illnesses or misfortunes are believed to be the work of ancestors or witches. Symptoms of affliction including backache, fever, boils, and difficulties in childbirth and hunting. The ritual tries to placate the spirits responsible.

Unlike rites of passage and other life-crisis rituals, which occur at regular times in the lives of individuals or of society, rituals of affliction get performed only in times of individual or social stress. In the Ndembu village studied by Turner there loomed economic, political, and social decay in the wake of the English government's withdrawal of its official recognition of the village chieftain. The loss of that recognition cost the village jobs, goods, and most of all political clout. The village was also facing problems in hunting and farming.

The consequent frustration stirred previously suppressed tensions among individuals and among clans—tensions rooted ultimately in the clash between matrilineal descent and virilocal marriage. Because of his particular lineage and personality one villager, Kamahasanyi, became the scapegoat. Overwhelmed by the scorn of his relatives and neighbors, he developed various physical ills, which he blamed on ancestors and witches. His ancestors, he claimed, were punishing him for the failure of his line to retain the chieftainship, and his relatives and neighbors were bewitching him out of frustration at their own plight.

Kamahasanyi demanded and received ritual curing. During the rituals all the personal antagonisms surfaced and were at least temporarily purged: "Ritual . . . must give expression to the illicit drives,

bring them into the open, as Ndembu say themselves, in order that they may be purged and exorcised."¹³ Kamahasanyi himself was vindicated, and his ailments ceased.

On the one hand Turner says that ritual serves to alleviate social turmoil: "Ndembu ritual . . . may be regarded as a magnificent instrument for expressing, maintaining, and periodically cleansing a secular order of society without strong political centralization and all too full of social conflict."¹⁴ On the other hand he says that ritual also serves to alleviate intellectual turmoil: "In the idiom of the rituals of affliction it is as though the Ndembu said: 'It is only when a person is reduced to misery by misfortune, and repents of the acts that caused him to be afflicted, that rituals expressing an underlying unity in diverse things may fittingly be enacted for him.' . . . It is as though he were stripped of all possessions, all status, all social connections, and then endowed with all the basic virtues and values of Ndembu society."¹⁵ If on the one hand ritual restores order to society, on the other hand it restores the places of human beings in society and the cosmos alike.

Ritual does both by acting out, by literally dramatizing, the situation it remedies. To use one of Turner's pet phrases, ritual is "social drama": "This notion of 'drama' is crucial to the understanding of ritual. Both in its plot and in its symbolism, a ritual is an epitome of the wider and spontaneous social process in which it is embodied and which ideally it controls."¹⁶ As drama, ritual does not merely respond to human experience but depicts it. Ritual alleviates turmoil not simply by releasing emotions but by presenting them: "Now, ritual is not merely a means of repressing these impulses and compelling members of the group that performs it to accept the top-level values in which its overall unity is expressed. Nor does it simply effect a 'cathartic' discharge of socially dangerous impulses by means of their dramatization, or by their symbolization if they are too obnoxious to be represented directly. Ritual among the Ndembu is neither a crusher nor a safety-valve. Rather does it utilize the power or energy of mutual hostility in particular relationships to promote reunification in these relationships, and mobilize and direct the total energy released by all the specific conflicts. Ritual, then, invests with that energy the quintessential symbols of the solidarity of the widest effective social group, of the whole Ndembu people. The dramatization, or symbolization, of conflict is the means wherewith such symbols are endued with warmth and desirability."¹⁷

As a statement, ritual constitutes a text. It must therefore be not just used but also interpreted. It possesses not just a function but also a meaning. In a double respect, then, Turner, together with Geertz and Douglas, breaks with Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and others: he is interested not only in the intellectual as well as the social function of ritual but also in its meaning as well as its function.

CRITICISM OF TURNER

As preoccupied as Turner is with *what* ritual says, he fails to explain *how* it does so. How ritual releases emotion he may partly explain, but how it conveys meaning he does not. As the prior quotation illustrates, he continually says only *that*, not *how*, ritual works.

Turner fails as well not so much to explain as to justify his nonreductionistic stance. As regularly as he says that a theory of ritual must capture the conscious, religious significance of ritual for its practitioners, he never says why. Like Mircea Eliade and other self-professed nonreductionists, Turner seems to take for granted exactly what requires justification: the tenet that the conscious, religious significance of ritual for participants is its true one for them.¹⁸ The issue is not whether the true significance of ritual is that of participants themselves. For whose significance can the true one be except that of participants? The issue is whether the true significance for participants is their conscious one. In the wake of all the discoveries by the social sciences one can scarcely assert that human beings are conscious of all the possible functions of their beliefs and actions. One can assert only that they know the true ones, but that assertion surely requires justification. Like other nonreductionists, Turner provides none. His commitment to nonreductionism is therefore ultimately arbitrary.

At the same time Turner's commitment to nonreductionism is also finally limited. For the intellectual function which he deciphers in ritual is really secular rather than specifically religious: religion fulfills humans' need for fixed places in society and the cosmos, not for religious places in particular. Religion is simply one means of fulfilling that need. It may well be for Turner the best means, but the need itself is secular. Even if religion for Turner were the sole means of fulfilling that need, the need would remain secular. Religion thus gets reduced to one means, however valuable, of satisfying a nonreligious need rather than remaining the exclusive means of satisfying an exclusively and so irreducibly religious one. In addition, the social function of ritual surely departs from the purely religious one purportedly cherished by believers.

These criticisms aside, Turner's effort remains daring. For he is claiming that ritual actually works, not merely is believed to work, and that it works by giving order to believers' lives, not merely by releasing believers' emotions. The ills ritual treats are psychosomatic, and Turner often compares Ndembu rituals with psychoanalysis. By the comparison he does not, however, mean to be reducing the ills to sheer feelings. Far from it, he means to be elevating them to ideas. Ndembu rituals work precisely because, like psychoanalysis, they are both intel-

lectual and emotional: they seek to understand ideas as well as to vent emotions.

Turner's writings are classifiable into three periods. In the 1950s, the period of works like *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, he was concerned with only the social function of not just ritual and religion but culture altogether.¹⁹ In the 1960s in works like *The Forest of Symbols*, *The Drums of Affliction*, and *The Ritual Process*, he became concerned with the intellectual function as well.²⁰ Since 1970, in such works as *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* and *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, he has remained concerned with both functions but has turned from primitive to modern society.²¹ In static, primitive society ritual, like culture generally, serves to reinforce both existing society and the existing places of human beings in both it and the cosmos. In dynamic, modern society ritual, as part of culture, serves to alter both society itself and the places of human beings in both it and the cosmos.

NOTES

1. On their theories of religion see Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960); "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton, A. S. A. Monographs, no. 3 (London: Tavistock, 1966), pp. 1-46; *Islam Observed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968); "Religion: Anthropological Study," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 12 (1968): 398-406; *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); *Natural Symbols*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1970); *Implicit Meanings* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975); *In the Active Voice* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967); *The Drums of Affliction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968); *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969); *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974); *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975); Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, ACLS Lectures on the History of Religions, n.s., no. 11 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

2. On their theories of religion see Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols., 1st ed. (London: Murray, 1871); James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., 12 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1911-1915); Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen and Unwin, 1915); A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922); Bronislaw Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion," in *Science, Religion and Reality*, ed. Joseph Needham (New York and London: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 20-84.

3. On their theories of religion see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing, 1957); Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950); Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1938).

4. On their theories of ritual see Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, esp. bk. 3; Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders*, esp. ch. 5; Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion," passim; Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, passim; Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, passim; Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, passim.

5. On their theories of ritual see Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, esp. vol. 2, ch. 18; Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, passim.

6. On their theories of ritual see the works by Geertz, Douglas, and Turner listed in note 1.

7. All quotations from *The Drums of Affliction* are from the paperback edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
10. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, passim; Freud, "Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," in *Character and Culture*, The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 17-26.
11. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott, rev. James Strachey (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964), passim; Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1964), ch. 35.
12. Turner, *The Drums of Affliction*, pp. 21-22.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 273-74.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
18. On his theory of religion see Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958); *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959); *The Quest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).
19. Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957).
20. See n. 1.
21. *Ibid.*