

# Ritual and Its Consequences

*An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*

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# Afterword

A basic distinction between tradition and modernity pervades both the scholarly community and commonsensical readings of world history. Such understandings typically include the claim that traditional societies are governed by ritual—that is, by largely unquestioned external norms, customs, and forms of authority that regulate individual lives. In contrast, modern societies are seen as valuing individual autonomy, such that norms, customs, and authority are accepted only through the conscious choice of the rational individual. Fundamentalist movements, according to this same line of reasoning, represent a rejection of the modern world and an attempt to return to a traditional world of ritual.

One of our arguments in this book is that almost every aspect of this framework is wrong. It is based upon a misunderstanding of ritual, a misunderstanding of earlier societies, a misunderstanding of our current situation, and a misunderstanding of movements like fundamentalism. It also leads to a potentially dangerous normative goal—namely, that what we and indeed all societies need is just more individual autonomy.

Our opening attempt to rethink these misunderstandings came through a rereading of ritual and ritual theory. Much modern ritual theory rests on understandings of ritual and religion that began to take their current form with the radical Protestant rejection of Roman ritual during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and that further developed during the Enlightenment. The most pervasive

aspect of this is to read ritual as an authoritarian, unquestionable, irrational set of constraints on the individual. The academic analogue of such an approach has been a certain reductionism in the study of ritual, such as can be found in the functionalist theories of figures like Radcliffe-Brown. Even the reaction against such a reading of ritual, like the interpretive approach that grew out of Geertz's work, derives from a post-Protestant and post-Enlightenment framework of the meaning-making individual. Ritual, under such an understanding, seems less authoritarian, but only by positing a belief framework underneath it. Ritual in this reading appears as no more than an outward enactment of inner states of belief.

In contrast, we have begun our study with a rethinking of ritual itself. We have been aided greatly in this process by taking discussions of ritual in non-Protestant traditions as seriously as we take anthropological discussions of ritual. We show, for example, how early Chinese and Judaic writers provide ways of thinking about ritual that differ distinctly from both Protestant and most modern social scientific understandings, and that should themselves be taken seriously as theory. These views provide a reading of ritual as a subjunctive, as the construction of an "as if" world. While many social scientific theories imbue ritual with a coherent worldview, these texts on ritual assume a world that is fragmented and broken. The subjunctive world of ritual resides in inherent tension with such a broken world, and such a subjunctive world is at least implicitly understood to be limited and temporary. Ritual, then, involves the endless work of building, refining, and rebuilding webs of relationships in an otherwise fragmented world. The work of ritual ceaselessly builds a world that, for brief moments, creates pockets of order, pockets of joy, pockets of inspiration. There is indeed autonomy in such a work, but it is an autonomy that recognizes the limited and fragmented world in which we always act.

Once ritual is viewed in this way, we not only can begin to understand it in a different way than much current theory would imply, but we come to realize that ritual is something that is happening to some extent all the time, in the most seemingly common, mundane aspects of our lives. Indeed, the ability, really the necessity, of humans to reside simultaneously in multiple worlds, ceaselessly playing upon the boundaries between them, may be universal. It is certainly pervasive in our everyday lives. We therefore explored how ritual in fact shares much with play. We also explored, with the help of psychoanalysis, how the ability to split the ego is a constant and universal feature of the human mind. And we analyzed how such a vision of ritual opens up new avenues for reading literature and art. Ritual allows us to face the unavoidable ambiguities and ambivalences of our existence.

Within such a frame, it becomes clear that the opposite of ritual is not the frequently proclaimed virtue of individual autonomy. It is rather sincerity—the belief that truth resides within the authentic self, that it is coherent, and that incoherence and fragmentation are therefore themselves signs of insincerity. And just as ritual is a pervasive aspect of human behavior, rather than a “traditional” form of authority, so is sincerity a pervasive aspect of human behavior as well. We have argued that both of these are universal, and to some extent both are always at play in our everyday lives. In human history, sincerity claims tend to gain particular allegiance and strength when a given ritual order is perceived to be too restrictive. The Protestant revolt against the Roman Catholic Church is just one of many such instances throughout human history.

What we usually call the “modern” period, therefore, should instead be understood in part as a period in which sincerity claims have been given a rare institutional and cultural emphasis. As a consequence, ritual has come to be seen from the perspective of sincerity claims, and has come to be relegated in our minds to a supposedly “traditional” order that the modern period has heroically superseded. Indeed, so pervasive have these sincerity claims become that even revolts against this so-called modern era are done in the name of finding ever-more-authentic forms of sincerity. Among these revolts are punk rock and, more important, fundamentalist movements. One of the many implications of our argument, then, is that fundamentalist movements—with their totalizing claims of authentic belief—should be understood as prototypical sincerity movements, not as a return to some kind of “traditional” ritual order.

The ethical implications of these arguments are numerous. We need to rethink our history, taking it out of the tradition/modernity distinction in which it is so often and mistakenly read, and we need to rethink our normative claims accordingly. Our argument is not that we should reject sincerity and turn fully to ritual—such a move is impossible, and as misguided as current attempts to totalize sincerity claims at the expense of ritual. Our argument is rather that we need to restore the balance between ritual and sincerity by once again taking seriously the claims of ritual. Among other things, taking ritual theorists from other traditions seriously helps teach us the tremendous dangers of trying to build a totally coherent world of authentic, individual truth-claims. It helps teach us instead to recognize the fragmented and discontinuous nature of the world, the endless work entailed in building and refining our multiple and often conflicting relationships within that world, and the ultimately tragic fate of that work. And it helps teach us the powers of ethical action based upon

such a tragic vision. To accept that the world is fragmented and discontinuous also means that the work of building and refining relationships is a process that will never end. Ritual, at least in its relationship to the rest of experience, is never totally coherent and never complete. Ritual is work, endless work. But it is among the most important things that we humans do.