

A close shave with God

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ABSTRACT

This article theorises about the need for rituals in primitive as well as modern societies. From the ongoing resurgence of interest in rituals, the author concludes that the human race is and always will be homo ritualensis. It seems that shaving as a mourning rite was accepted for a very long time in Israel, but that it was later prohibited. The author then discusses Lawson & McCauley's cognitive theory of religious rituals and comes to the conclusion that shaving probably was a religious ritual and that it could be very valuable as a mourning rite, even today.

A THE MOURNING AFTER ...

Some months ago, I stood at the grave of a beloved niece, a wonderful sixteen year-old girl who died prematurely. In the words of a popular song of some years ago, I am aware that 'on a worldwide scale it is just another winter's tale'; because in the same week a small aircraft crashed, and four families were left fatherless; people were shot in hijackings and burglaries; women were raped and children were molested; all while there was a war of major proportions raging. Still, to my brother and his wife, to me and the rest of our family it was, and still is, the worst experience we ever had to face.

My brother asked me to bury his daughter. What does one say at a time like this? How does one make sense of a senseless act? Words seem to keep one busy, but it seems that only certain acts really touch the heart. So we talked a lot, but mostly we just kept close to one another. In the sermon I tried to put the experience in words, but we also performed meaningful rites. At the grave we took some sand to be strewn at a special plant in our garden. We planted a rose garden in front of her window, as we did at the school she attended. There at the school her fellow pupils gathered to plant the rose garden, stood around the rose plants with lit candles, and said goodbye to a dear friend. And now, life goes on, but we are not the same any more.

Does something as personal as this fit in an academic paper? It was and always will be my passion that what we do in our academic work should lead to useable knowledge, and make a difference to how we cope with and enjoy life. Maybe it is my way to come to grips with the enigma of meaning and the opportunities of living.

So I remembered another song, namely the theme song from the film

Poseidon Adventure. 'There's got to be a morning after ...' goes the lyrics. However, I also know we cannot embrace life in the morning after while we still carry the baggage of the past. How do we come to grips with the past in such a way that we free our hands and arms to embrace the future? All peoples of all cultures had and still have elaborate mourning rites to help them to greet the dead and to re-orientate those left behind towards a life worth living. Is this a field of study for anthropologists who study 'foreign' cultures? Is there still a place for rituals, maybe even religious rituals, today?

B HOMO RITUALENSIS

All anthropologists describe rites and customs 'foreign' to their own. If one can get a group of people untouched and uncontaminated by modern (Western) culture, so much better. Anthropologists usually focused on the strange, the foreign and the uncommon. Anthropologists of the cognitive variety, however, currently believe that we should focus on that which we as humans share. Interestingly enough, they are finding that we share a common foundation in the way we represent in our minds important aspects of life and living.

Death is the one certainty we all live with. No matter what we do, some time or another we have to contend with the death of someone near to us, as well as with our own mortality. No wonder all cultures have elaborate mourning rituals.

Mourning and death rituals are quite prominent in ancient cultures, and we have a lot to give us a peek into their customs from what were left behind with the bodies of the deceased. Arnold van Gennep (1960) provided a handy description of rituals guiding people through times of change, which he called rites of passage. All books describing cultures give elaborate attention to rituals in general, and mourning rituals in particular. How we handle death has a lot to say about how we live life.

On the surface it might seem that modern Western people have outgrown rituals. We are not so ritualistic any more. If this is the case, rituals can be seen as learned behaviour that is culturally bound. If the culture does not warrant it, it will not come to the fore. It might seem to be something that disappears as people become more 'civilized' and advanced.

However, there are clear indications that such an arrogant outlook is far from the truth. Ritual seems to be inborn in the human race, even ingrained into our being.

In a book called *Deeply into the bone: Re-inventing rites of passage*, Ronald L Grimes tells about people contacting him to invent rites of passage to celebrate or help them cope with events like menopause, naming ceremonies, how to initiate a toddler who reached adolescence, to help terminally ill people who consider ending their own lives, and people planning their own funeral services (Grimes 2000:2-3). He then set out and wrote a book of 384 pages on how we can

re-invent meaningful rites today, covering aspects like celebrating new life, coming of age, divining mates and making kin, living with the dead and exiting gracefully, and passages of troubled and uncharted terrain like abortion and cutting the cord of employment. According to Grimes (2000:5) his project is

about the power of rites, both traditional and invented, to facilitate or obstruct difficult passages in the course of a human life. Not every passage is a rite of passage. We undergo passages, but we enact rites. ... Even a single rite of passage can divide a person's life into 'before' and 'after'. ... Effective rites depend on inheriting, discovering, or inventing value-laden images that are driven deeply, by repeated practice and performance, into the marrow. The images proffered by ineffective rites remain skin-deep.

In similar vein Gerard Lukken (1999) wrote about the importance of rituals for people today. According to him there was a serious crisis of rituals in the 1960's in the sense that rituals were disappearing from society and especially from churches, with a resulting 'ritual vacuum'. Furthermore, rituals were seen in a negative light:

Zij worden nog vaak beschouwd als louter formele en stereotiepe kaders, die gemakkelijk leiden tot oneerlijk en onwaarachtig gedrag. En ik signaleerde opnieuw de al langer bestaande tendens onder sociologen zich minachtend over geritualiseerd gedrag uit te laten (Lukken 1999: 11).

On the other hand, Lukken points to the current resurgence in rituals, a 'ritual explosion', which started in the 1990's, continuing to this day. For this reason he deems it necessary to look critically at the ways we practise and use rituals, and to guide people, especially from Christian inclination, to use it positively.

From this and many other sources it is clear that we are, always were and always will be, a ritual race: *homo ritualensis*.

To cope with the mourning after, we have no option than to rite the storm.

C TO SHAVE OR NOT TO SHAVE, THAT IS THE QUESTION ...

The Old and New Testaments provide many clues to the mourning rites of their times, of which shaving rites were a part. Reading the texts, however, we are left with a dilemma. In short, to shave or not to shave, that is the question.

Grunwaldt (1999:245) and many other commentators rightly states that shaving as part of mourning rituals was accepted in Israel for hundreds of years, as so many texts indicate (Am 8:10; Mi 1:16; Is 3:24; 15:2; Jr 16:6; 18:37; Ezk 27:31; Job 1:20; 1 Ki 18:28; Jr 41:5.) Only very late in the tradition it was forbidden, as can be seen in Leviticus 19:27-28 and Deuteronomy 14:1. The exact reason and meaning of shaving and exactly how it was done cannot be

reconstructed. Nowhere is it described in detail. The same goes for the prohibition. Why it was forbidden is not stated explicitly.

De Vaux (1974:59-61) mentions that mourners shaved their hair and beard, but that these rites were condemned for the taint of heathenism they preserve. He also said these rites had a religious significance, even though we cannot define it now.

Some commentators think the prohibition is because of the link to Canaanite and Baal rites. Gispén (1950:285-286) said hair of family members was left with the corpse to keep a link with the deceased. Wenham (1979) took it as more than prohibition of pagan mourning rites. He interprets it as a more general prohibition against bodily disfigurement. Mourning is not prohibited, only customs that involve physical disfigurement. God created man in his image; good and beautiful. Therefore his external appearance should reflect his internal status as the chosen and holy people of God. He sees a reflection of the same idea in 1 Corinthians 6:20. Most other commentators just mention in passing the opposing ideas in the tradition.

Gerstenberger (1996:277) states that mourning rites evolve around three points:

- 1 Fear of the dead.
- 2 Concern for the welfare of the deceased in the world beyond.
- 3 Pain and future of those left behind.

To him the prohibition is not easily explained, and only mentioning it may be because it is antiquated, or not aesthetic.

Milgrom (2000:1689-1692) discusses the matter in more detail. To him shaving is a mourning rite that could claim divine approval, as can be deduced from Isaiah 22:12 and other texts (Is 3:24; Am 8:10; etc). Because hair grows throughout life, hair was seen as the seat of man's vitality and symbolized the life force of the individual. He cites Schmidt (1996:287, 290) who states that self-mutilation is aimed to make oneself unrecognisable for ghosts on the haunt. The dead is jealous of the still living, and might come and harm them. The ban on shaving and self-mutilation, according to Milgrom, aims at eradicating the pervasive and tenacious cult of the dead.

Saul M Olyan (1998:611-622) also mentions the sparse attention given to the rites and their possible meanings. According to Olyan, shaving is easily visible and easily manipulated. It signals entry into a state of mourning. It also signals the mourner's separation from the community, as well as a temporary identification between the mourner and the departed.

A study of the other shaving rites indicate to Olyan that shaving rites are flexible in meaning; they do many things, and one must look to their context to determine precisely what they accomplish and what they signal (1998:621). What they have in common, though, is that they effect a change in an individual's status and serve as a public, temporary marker of this status change. Counter

interpretations by Leach (1958 – who states shaving has sexual connotations) and Hallpike (1969 – who states that cutting equals control, letting grow equals separation from social control), Olyan states that there is no intrinsic meaning to hair or its manipulation. All meaning is culturally dependent and context-bound. Biblical material, however, signals to him that shaving effects and marks ritual transition, a change of status of the one shaved (1998:622). He then wonders whether this generalization beyond biblical representations is possible.

From this it seems the verdict is still out on what to do on a bad-hair day, and especially what to do when one has a close shave with God. Maybe we should go to the root of things, more precisely go below the scalp on which the hair grows, for more clarity.

D MINDLESS, SENSELESS RITUALS?

1 How do we make sense of rituals?

When my daughter was about seven months old, I took her with me to the stores. She was securely strapped in the front seat of the car, enjoying the view outside. A few drops of rain started to fall, and I decided to put on the windscreen wipers. I imagined she might be amused with the movement. However, she was terrified by it, and it grew worse the longer it went on. Instead of amusing her, the sudden movements triggered her agent detection facility. To her the wipers seemed to move under its own power, therefore she assumed it was alive. She wanted to flee from these things that lunged at her, but she could not because she was strapped in.

Children are expert agent detectors. An agent is a living entity performing an action. Detecting agents is an indispensable survival strategy. The world can be divided into those who hunt and those who are hunted. If you can detect a hunter before it gathers you, you can live to hunt and gather one more day. Something that moves, is under suspicion firstly as being something that hunts, and thereafter as being something that can be hunted. Guthrie (1993) calls this our hyperactive agent-detection device (HADD). It is better to mistakenly identify something as an agent, than to miss a possible predator. People tend to over-attribute intentional action as the cause of affairs when data is ambiguous or sketchy (Barrett 2000:31).

This tendency continues throughout life. It is in essence a strategy aimed at making sense of the world: What can I do, and who is doing what to me. What do I give, and what do I receive? They help us to answer questions like: Who am I? Where do I fit in? What am I allowed to do and not to do? Who are other people? Where do they fit in? What are they allowed to do and not to do? Someone once remarked sarcastically: ‘Do unto others before they have time to do unto you!’ Seen in this way, our belief about what goes on in the world can be depicted in the following formula: ‘An agent acts upon a patient by means of an instrument to produce a consequence.’

The agent is on the giving end, and the patient is on the receiving end. Whenever people are together, this is what is going on. Many conversations centre in the theme of someone who caused something to happen to someone else.

All actions cause something. However, some actions are more momentous than others. They are milestones along the way. Although one day is just like any other day, one's birthday is special, and there are certain customs and rituals to celebrate it. When people make a team, they are awarded the colours at a special ceremony. When students have met the requirements to obtain a degree, there is a special ceremony at which the degree is conferred to the successful candidates. Although students have worked for three or more years and have passed the exams, they are not allowed to use the title going with the degree until after the ceremony. The military have graduation ceremonies where ranks are conferred. A country goes to the polls and selects their leader. However, he or she does not become president until after the inauguration ceremony. Many rituals take place to guide people through experiences of transition from one state to another, like birth, entry into adulthood, marriage, and death. Life is full of rituals, large and small.

It is a very short step from here to religious ritual.

2 Lawson and McCauley bring ritual to mind

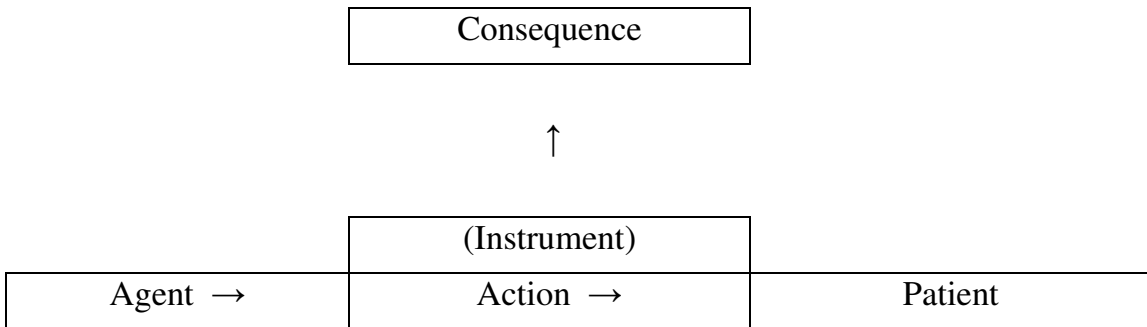
Lawson and McCauley (1990 & 2002) put forward a well-developed cognitive theory of religious rituals. They make the following distinctions between religious activities and religious rituals.

a Religious rituals bring about changes in the religious world (temporary or permanent) by virtue of the fact that they involve transactions with Culturally Postulated Superhuman agents (CPS-agents for short). A person baptized can be described as a baptized person, while a person who prayed could be feigning.

b The 'insider-outsider' criterion stipulates that mere religious actions are open to outsiders, while religious rituals are typically only open to insiders. They point to the fact that a non-Catholic is welcome to pray with Catholics, but not to take Holy Communion with them.

c Rituals are usually embedded in and connected to other rituals. In Protestant churches a person needs to be baptized in order to qualify to be ordained as minister, but that is not necessary in order to be able to pray.

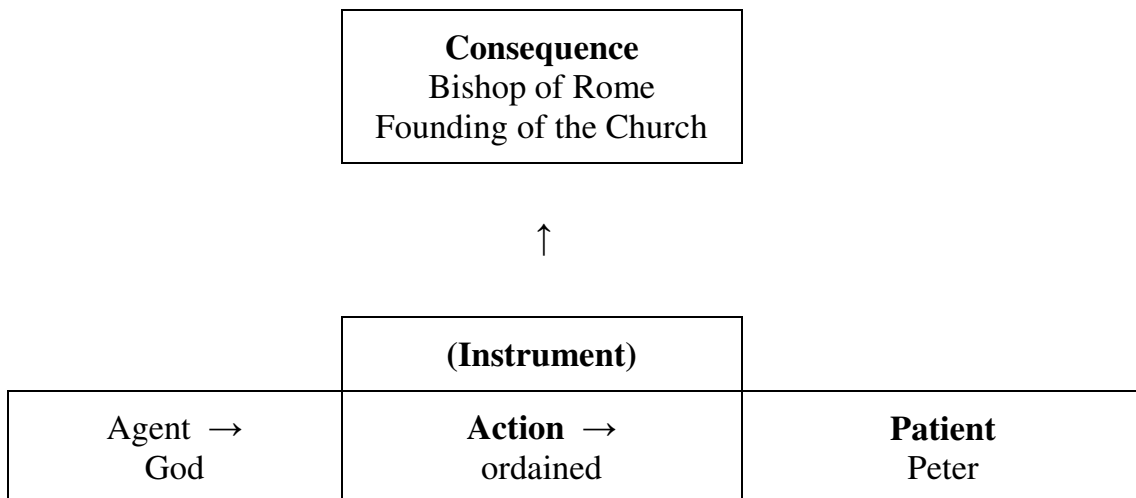
According to Lawson and McCauley (1990 & 2002), ritual is also easy to understand and easy to represent in one's mind, because it follows the familiar pattern of agents, actions and patients (or objects), well-known from the social causal sphere:



However, what distinguishes religious ritual from ordinary action is the involvement of unusual agents believed to possess special powers. These culturally postulated superhuman agents (CPS-agents) may be involved as the agent, the patient, or the instrument.

The position that the superhuman agent occupies or the role that he plays makes an important difference regarding four aspects of the ritual, namely its centrality, repeatability, reversibility and sensory pageantry.

Centrality regards how important a ritual is to a religion. The more direct God is involved, the more central and important a ritual will be. The Roman Catholic Church believes that Jesus instituted the church by ordaining Peter as the first bishop of Rome. Whether it is true or not, does not matter. What matters is that people believe it is so, and act upon such belief. Similarly, the Eucharist, the Roman Catholic version of commemorating the death of Jesus, has a high centrality value. The reason is that because of their belief in the doctrine of transubstantiation, Christ himself is present in the bread and the wine – it becomes his body and his blood.



Repeatability concerns how many times a ritual is going to be performed for a given participant. If God is the agent, a ritual is going to be performed once

only for a given participant. If God is the patient or acting as the instrument, the ritual is likely to be repeated often.

When people represent (which means more or less think about) rituals there is an important principle involved, called the PSA. The Principle of Superhuman Agency indicates the role the CPS-agent takes in the ritual. It is of crucial importance whether the CPS-agent is in the role of the agent, or whether he or she is in the role of the patient or instrument.

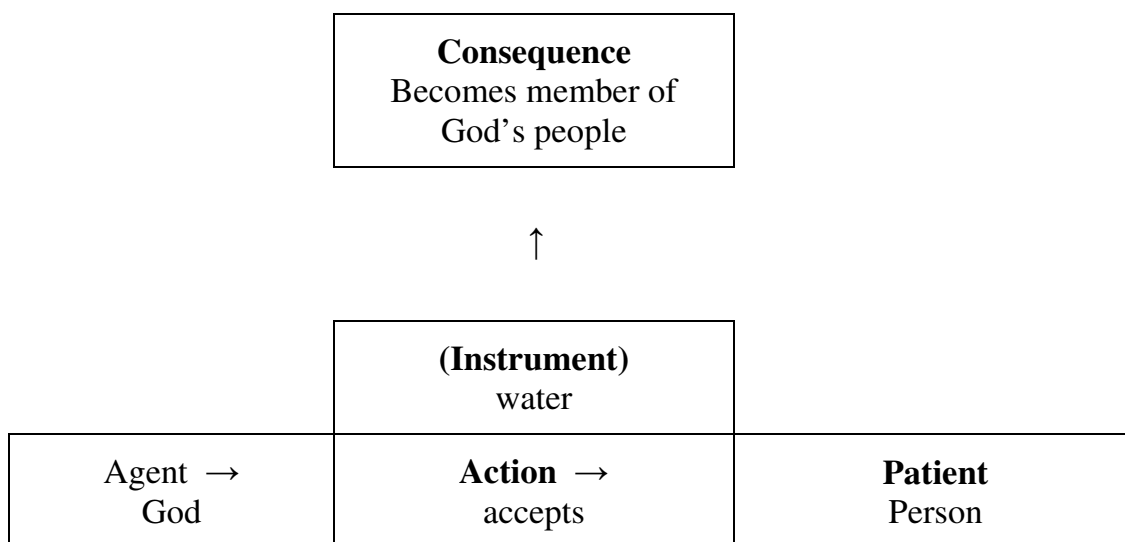
If the CPS-agent is acting as the agent, it is called a Special Agent ritual.

If the CPS-agent is acting in one of the other positions, it is a Special Patient ritual or a Special Instrument ritual.

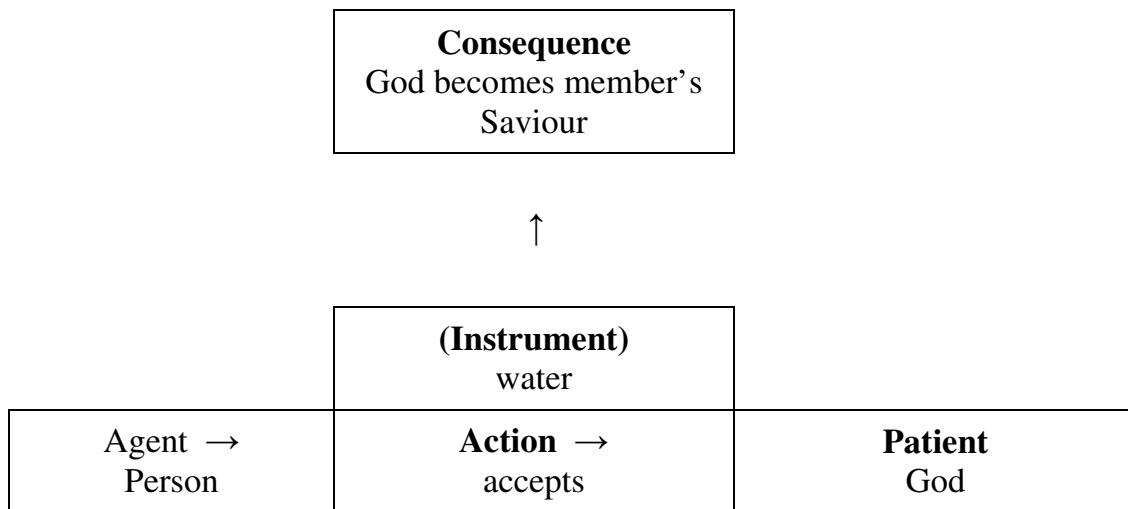
This determines a ritual's repeatability and reversibility.

Some examples will elucidate this principle. In the Eucharist of the Roman Catholic Church and the Last Supper for the Protestants, Jesus is in the role of the patient. He was sacrificed, in other words something was done to him. The event is commemorated by regularly repeating the ritual.

Baptism is another interesting example. Baptism of children is usually done only once. The reason is that God is seen as the actor, because with the ritual of baptism God accepts the person as part of his people, whether the person is an infant or an adult. This needs never to be repeated, because what God has done, needs not to be done again or better later on.

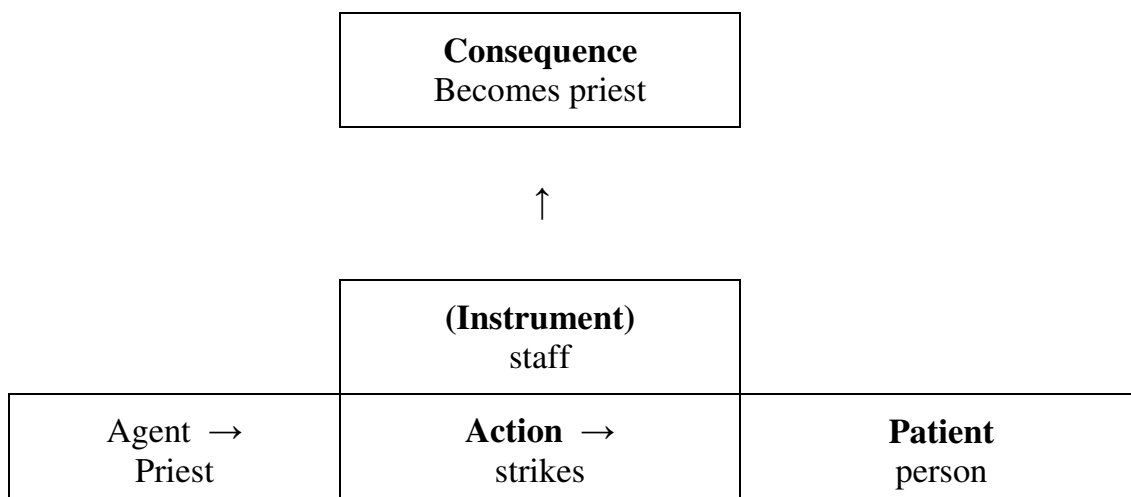


However, baptism is also used to depict something else. Some churches baptize people whereby they publicly proclaim to have accepted Christ as their Saviour. In this case God is the patient (person accepts God), and therefore the action can be and is sometimes repeated.

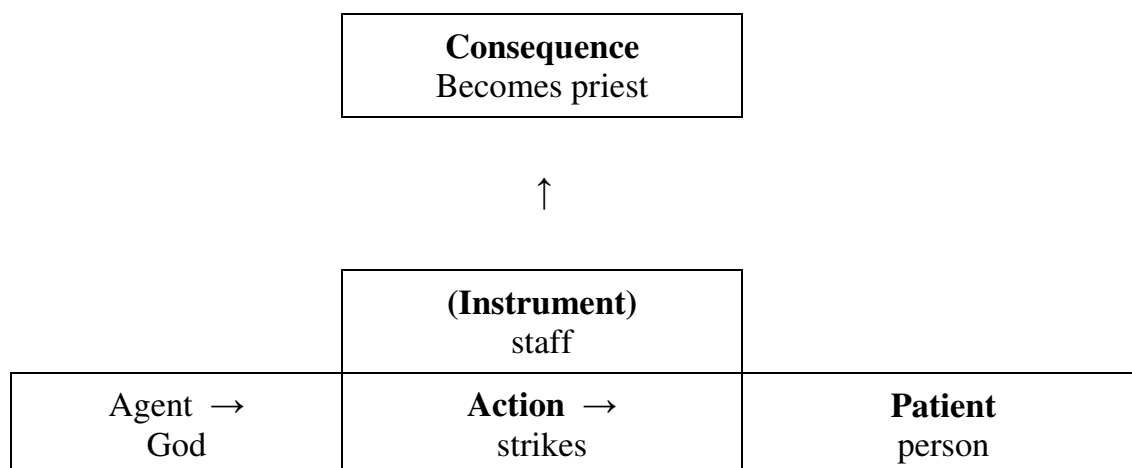


We thus see that the same ritual (baptism) is used to depict two different consequences. The first says God chooses a person. The second says a person chooses God. Because people focus on the surface features of the ritual, people tend to think it is the same, hence the theological and ecclesiastical conflicts regarding infant versus adult baptism. That this is true, is clear from the fact that churches who practise infant baptism have a ritual whereby people publicly confess their faith. Similarly, churches that practise baptism of adults have a ritual where babies are being devoted to God. People regularly renew their devotion to God. God needs to accept someone once only.

Reversibility concerns whether the consequence of the ritual can be undone by another ritual. If God is the agent, it can be reversed. If God is the patient or instrument, it cannot be reversed. An example of a ritual with God in the role of agent is with ordination. A priest strikes a person with a staff, and that person also becomes a priest.



The priest who holds the staff acts on behalf of God, so that it is actually God who ordained the new priest. The priest gets his power from God, who originally ordained Peter as bishop of Rome, according to Roman Catholic belief.



Similarly, in Protestant churches it entails that God ordains a minister through an already ordained minister, who gets his authority from God who ordained him. If an ordained person shows he or she is not worthy of it, the ritual can be ritually reversed, when that person is stripped of his or her office. God has done his part, by choosing and appointing a person. However, the person did not do his part, and therefore God reverses his action. Similarly, people who have been chosen by God through baptism can be ritually excommunicated when they show themselves unworthy of the opportunity given to them.

In contrast to this, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross cannot be undone. He was sacrificed, and that is it, whether people accept it or not.

Sensory pageantry is the emotional impact of the ritual. If God is the agent, the ritual is likely to be performed only once, and the emotional impact will be high. If God is the patient or the instrument, the ritual is likely to be repeated very often, and the emotional impact will be lower. Children, and often adults, do not necessarily have to be able to explain the meaning or theological background of the ritual to find it meaningful. They sense the importance and understand the basic flow of events, because it follows a pattern well known from everyday experience.

E THE NAKED TRUTH

Lawson and McCauley's theory states that meanings given to rituals may vary, but that has no effect on the underlying forms of the rituals (2002:9). They say the following:

We think that religious ritual form and the properties of rituals it explains and predicts are overwhelmingly independent of attributed meanings. ... In other words, these very general features of religious ritual form are independent of both semantic and cultural contents.

An important first question to ask is whether shaving is a ritual proper, according to Lawson and McCauley's definition. It may be an ordinary ceremony practised without any religious involvement. However, Luken (1999:272-274) shows that death is usually, even today, seen to involve God. In Old Testament times, this was definitely the case.

- 1 It brings about change, albeit temporarily.
- 2 It is usually an insider that is involved.
- 3 It is an embedded ritual, part of a larger group of rituals.

A second question we have to answer when thinking about shaving (and any other) rituals, is where in the world is God. Is he the agent, making it a special agent ritual, or is he the patient or instrument, making it a special patient or special instrument ritual?

Shaving rituals cannot be special agent rituals. A person gets born once, gets initiated into adulthood once, gets married once (at a time), and dies once. A bereaved family member can go through this more than once. The shaver is the actor, the action is to change his or her appearance in order to show something, to somebody, the patient. It is in the patient position that the CPS-agent may be, depending on what is being shown or communicated. If what is communicated is the change in appearance, then the patient is the dead person's ghost from whom the still living wants to hide. If the hair is shaved to offer as a sacrifice to the gods, then the gods are the patients. In this sense it is understandable that the rites were forbidden, because it works with concepts of god foreign to Yahwism. Seen in this way, it was nearer to the centre of religion and was also embedded into other rituals that were unacceptable at the time.

The fact that they were accepted for such a long time indicates that they depicted something else at that time. If the patient was the community or even God, to whom the being wounded, grief, or a changed status was communicated, the ritual is more remotely connected to central religious belief, less open to contamination with foreign ideas and thus less threatening to the mainline religion of the time.

We are left too little information to come to final answers. However, Lawson and McCauley's theory gives us a little more muscle and rigour to interpret this and other rituals, without being left with un-testable opposing interpretations about possible meanings. We can look at and understand the form of rituals, and from there on work towards possible meanings attributed to the rituals.

Much work is still to be done about OT rituals, seen from this vantage point.

F CONCLUSION

The death of a beloved niece confronted me with my own and other people's mortality, and it changed me for ever. I did not choose to communicate that by shaving my hair – if I knew what I know now, I might have done that. However, the change is firmly rooted in my heart and mind, and in this regard rituals will be my companions to re-orientate me to continue living life as fully as I can.

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