
As noted in the Chapter One of *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, much of the energy of contemporary anthropology is committed to cognitive-evolutionary explanations of religion, and most of this effort has been directed at explaining religious ideas (e.g. Guthrie, Boyer, Atran, etc.)—that is, why people have religious beliefs and which beliefs are particularly appealing and enduring. However, some anthropologists, like Harvey Whitehouse, have applied the cognitive approach to ritual, stressing for example the role of attention, memory, and motivation in religious activity. Whitehouse concluded that the *frequency* of ritual was the key variable, certain kinds of rituals being highly imagistic and memorable but infrequent, while other rituals are more language-based, leaving less of an impression but conducted more often.

In their influential work, Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson reject Whitehouse’s conclusion, arguing instead for a kind of “religious ritual competence.” The starting point for McCauley and Lawson, as for most anthropologists since Marett, is that ritual action *is* action, not fundamentally different from any other human social action. Hence, because the “differences between everyday action and religious ritual action turn out to be fairly minor,” then “the cognitive apparatus for the representation of religious ritual form is the same system deployed for the representation of action in general” (2002: 8). That is, humans have handy, if largely tacit, skills to make sense of action and participate in it. McCauley and Lawson liken this knowledge or skill to language, for which individuals also have an evolved and learned but mostly unconscious competence. They assert, then, that “ritual forms” are much like grammar in language.
Just as in grammar there are certain kinds of words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) and certain fields or functions to fill in a sentence (subject, verb, object, etc.), so in all action, they propose, there are certain “slots” or roles to make meaningful action—specifically, the slot of agent or actor, the slot of patient or subject of action, and the slot of instrument(s) used in the action. This is what they call the “action representation system.” In a word, all social action is intuitively understood to be someone/thing acting on someone/thing, often with something.

As for other anthropologists and social scientists, their key to social (including ritual) action is “agency” or the understanding that beings or persons do things for reasons. “Whether we focus on an everyday action such as closing a door or a ritual action such as initiating a person into a religious group, our understanding of these forms of behavior as actions at all turns critically on recognizing agents” (8).

Now, as we have emphasized throughout the book, religions posit agents other than and in many ways superior to humans, be they spirits or dead ancestors or gods. The only real difference between mundane action and religious ritual for McCauley and Lawson is the participation of such beings/persons, which they call “culturally postulated superhuman agents” or CPS-agents. Like all agents, they can occupy one or more of the roles or slots in action. The “basic action structures” of ritual therefore exhibit the following characteristics:

1. include the roles (agents, acts, instruments, and patients) that distinguish actions (and rituals) from other events and happenings;
2. take – as ritual elements – the various entities and acts, as well as their properties, qualities, and conditions, that can fulfill these formal roles in religious rituals;
3. presume that at least two of these roles must always be filled (viz., that every action has an agent and that the agent must do something);
4. reflect the constraint that although any item filling the role of the agent may also serve as a patient, not all items that serve as patients may also fill the agent role;
5. reveal points of variability in the forms of actions such as whether they involve the use of special instruments as a condition of the act; and
6. accommodate the enabling relationships between actions, such as whether the performance of one act presupposes the performance of another (12-3).
Interestingly, because they define religious ritual as behavior in which an agent acts on a patient and at least one of those actors is a CPS-agent, not all “religious behavior” is “ritual” for them. Specifically, religious rituals “involve transactions with these strategically informed agents” (20).

To make a complicated argument as simple as possible, the particular structure of the roles and relationships in a ritual will produce different kinds of rituals, with different qualities, for instance what they call “special agent rituals” as opposed to “special patient” or “special instrument” rituals. Some rituals, namely special patient and special instrument rituals, can or must be repeated, while others need not be and perhaps cannot be (e.g. there is no need to repeat a baptism, but there is a need to repeat the Catholic mass); some rituals can be reversed (like a wedding), while others cannot. For them as for Whitehouse, memory and motivation are central issues, and “sensory pageantry” or the visceral and emotional experience of ritual is key to its power, but ritual frequency cannot be the deciding variable since “nearly all religious rituals are performed over and over again” (86).

In summary, then, McCauley and Lawson argue that all social action has a certain form and that humans have an evolved cognitive capacity to understand action (the action representation system). A central part of this system is the participation of and interaction with agents, and “religion” is that dimension of culture that adds non-human but human-like agents (culturally postulated superhuman agents) to the scene. However, the rudiments of action are the same, whether humans, CPS agents, or both are involved. Religious ritual is little more than normal social action with CPS agents. Therefore, they conclude “that it is participants’ mostly tacit knowledge of ritual forms that is the critical cognitive variable that largely determines not only rituals’ performance frequencies but also such things as how much emotional firepower a religious ritual possesses” (100).
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