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Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice*

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A new model of ritual based on Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) theory is developed. It is argued that ritual practices generate belief and belonging in participants by activating multiple social-psychological mechanisms that interactively create the characteristic outcomes of ritual. Specifically, the distinctive elements of ritual practice are shown to induce altered subjective states and effortful and/or anomalous behaviors, which are subsequently misattributed in such a way that belief and belonging are created or maintained around the focus of ritual attention. These processes are traced in detail, and the resulting model is shown to be empirically credible, comprehensive, and theoretically fertile.

The practice of ritual produces two primary outcomes—*Belief* and *Belonging*. Here, “belief” is an alliterative way to express the certainty, credulity, and confidence that are the familiar result of rituals (Collins 1988; Durkheim [1912] 1995). Mere knowledge is insufficient for human epistemic needs; our reliance on constructed mental models necessitates a foundation of *beliefs* that are integral, unconditional, and secured against the doubt-producing anomalies that all socially constructed *nomi* contain (Berger 1967).¹ That rituals play a part in the production of this belief is suggested both by their noted capacity to resolve paradox and inconsistency (Homans 1941; Berger 1967; D’Aquili and Laughlin 1975) and by their timing, occurring as they do in the wake of epistemically threatening events such as death, defeat, and aberration (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Malinowski 1974; Baumeister 1991).

“Belonging,” too, is alliterative shorthand for a larger idea, in this case one composed of attraction, identification, and cohesion. Just as belief is a step beyond knowledge, belonging is a step beyond membership. Group memberships arise via some combination of chance and choice, but in every case they are an external fact, a status that one may not be committed to or desirous of. Human social interdependence necessitates that at least some of these memberships become solidified into something potent and secure—in short, belonging.² The role of rituals in the creation of belonging is suggested by the fact that social integration and a sense of unity are among the most noted outcomes and functions of ritual (Durkheim [1912] 1995; D’Aquili and Laughlin 1975; Lex 1976; Ornstein 1977; Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Baumeister 1991; Baumeister and Leary 1995), and the ethological evidence that the use of rituals is a means of social bonding common to many social species (Lorenz 1966; D’Aquili and Laughlin 1975).

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¹Note that just as mere knowledge is insufficient, accuracy is unnecessary when it comes to “belief” as it is being used here.

²The belongingness-generating effects of ritual are most apparent among rituals accompanying life transitions. Whatever else they may do, transitions (birth, death, marriage, puberty) mark times when one’s memberships change: from child to adult, from spouse to widow, from outsider to insider. It is essential that one’s subjective sense of belonging change with objective membership. Old bonds and identities must be relaxed and new ones forged. This is exactly what initiation ceremonies accomplish (Van Gennep 1908). Turner (1969) particularly emphasizes the “*communitas*” that the cohort of initiates develop among themselves.

A MODEL OF RITUAL

Although there is general agreement about the basic outcomes of ritual, there is little consensus about just how these outcomes are produced. Most thinking about rituals in recent years has focused on their symbolic content, maintaining that ritual is merely one more medium in which ideas are symbolically expressed, transmitted, and reinforced. But such an approach cannot explain why *these* particular messages are expressed in *this* particular way; or why, if ritual is primarily a means of communicating messages, participants are so often uncertain, conflicted, and ignorant of what those meanings are (Lewis 1980). In keeping with Durkheim’s contention that symbolism and ideas are secondary to behavior and sentiments in the origins and understanding of religion (Durkheim [1887] 1972, [1912] 1995), the current paper assumes that the best way to understand ritual’s epistemic and integrative functioning is to begin with its most universal and salient aspect—its practices. The goal of this paper is to propose a comprehensive, empirically credible, and theoretically fertile theory of how ritual practices transform knowledge into belief and membership into belonging.

The model to be presented here is closely akin to Durkheim’s seminal theory of ritual presented in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 1995). Randall Collins (1988) has usefully distilled the model to a handful of elements, which will figure prominently in the current model. Though the model itself is not particularly complex, its presentation may be, due to the simultaneity of the mechanisms and the bidirectional influence among some elements. To aid in comprehension, Figure 1 presents a schematic diagram of the model.

Co-Presence

As Durkheim noted and others have subsequently confirmed (Schachter 1959; Wrightsman 1960), under “great collective shock . . . social interactions become much more frequent and active . . . individuals seek one another out and come together more” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:212–13). This impulse to assemble is independent of any intention to engage in ritual practice, and even apart from the larger ritual process, it has a profound influence over those assembled.

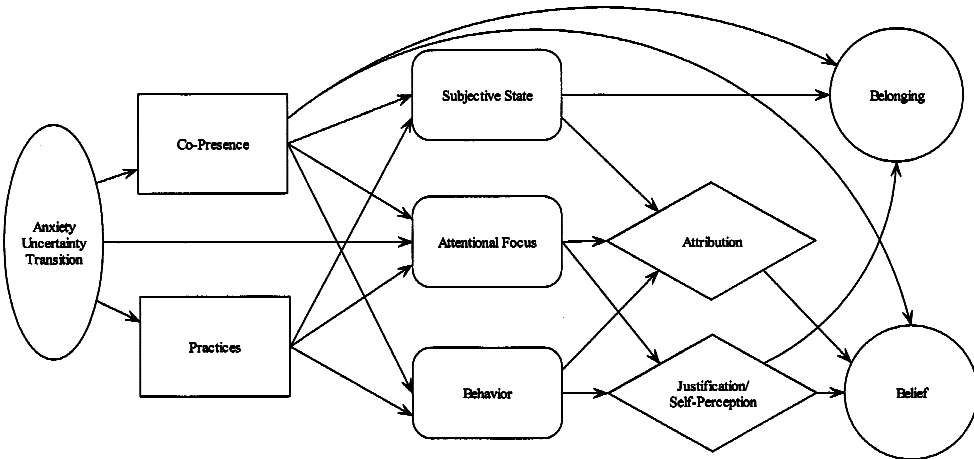


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Ritual Theory Presented Here

The Direct Effects of Co-Presence on Belief. In a world that chronically provides only incomplete or ambiguous information, individuals regularly look to others to provide definition of, validation of, and reassurance regarding their understanding of the situation (Thomas 1928; Festinger 1954; Berger and Luckman 1966; Cialdini 1993). This tendency is magnified in times of stress, uncertainty, and doubt; it is then that “with passion” we seek “the company of those who feel and think as we do” (Durkheim [1893] 1984:48).

Though this practice can and does glean useful information, its motivation and outcomes have less to do with obtaining accurate information than with reducing uncertainty and preserving, even escalating, belief (Schachter 1959).³ Among group members who already share the relevant beliefs, co-presence produces both intensification and extremization of those beliefs via the process of “group polarization” (Wallach, Kogan, and Bem 1962).

The Direct Effects of Co-Presence on Belonging. At the same time that it has direct effects on belief, co-presence also has powerful and direct effects on belonging. Simple contact between individuals is a powerful source of liking and cohesion (Baumeister and Leary 1995), playing as it does upon multiple mechanisms of attachment, including mere exposure, propinquity, similarity, and mere categorization (Berscheid and Reis 1998). Moreover, both the developmental and ethological evidence indicate that such proximity-attachment linkages have strong biological underpinnings (Lorenz 1937; Bowlby 1969).

Other Effects of Co-Presence. Probably the most significant result of co-presence for our purposes is *deindividuation* (Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcombe 1952; Zimbardo 1970). Deindividuation and ritual practice converge in terms of both cause and effect.⁴ As the name implies, the gist of deindividuation has to do with the loss of a sense of self, resulting in three important effects: (1) a strong sense of unity with and liking for the group and its members, thus contributing directly to belonging; (2) behavior that is disinhibited and free from the normative and moral constraints that usually constrain it; and (3) a direct and positive impact on the participant’s subjective state via its ability to reduce self-awareness (Diener 1979).⁵

Co-presence with conspecifics also fosters a generalized physiological *arousal* in many species, including humans (Durkheim [1912] 1995:217; Zajonc, Heingartner, and Herman 1969). This arousal has several relevant implications. It directly affects subjective states, facilitates more intense and more prolonged activity, and most interestingly, results in *social facilitation* (Zajonc 1965), which means that in the case of well-learned or repetitive tasks, the presence of others improves one’s performance on that task.

Finally, co-presence influences both behavior and subjective state via *conformity* and *contagion*, the ubiquity of which are well established. Under their influence, people enact behaviors they may not otherwise have, often without even knowing why, or even that they are doing so (Langer 1989). In one germane example, Altheide and Johnson (1977) established the effectiveness of the Billy Graham organization’s tactic of “salting” its revival

³The primacy of belief validation over information provision during co-presence is most striking in the case of failed millenarian predictions, wherein disconfirming evidence results in a loss of faith only among those isolated from the group, while those co-present are able not only to maintain their faith but to augment it (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956; Hardyck and Braden 1962).

⁴Indeed, some of the most interesting research in this tradition has involved re-creating ritual practices in the laboratory, with the effect of also creating the usual array of ritual effects in subjects (Diener 1979).

⁵This is significant because research on self-awareness (Duval and Wicklund 1972; Carver and Scheier 1981) demonstrates that self-focused attention can be painfully aversive, especially in the wake of anomalous and threatening events (Baumeister 1991). By focusing the participant’s attention outward instead of inward, deindividuation frees the “I” from the “Me,” providing respite from such aversive self-awareness.

audiences with confederates who come forward at prearranged points in the service, thereby inducing others to follow suit.

Conformity extends beyond the overt level during co-presence, as interactants conform to each other on a long list of subtle behaviors, from conversational rhythms to posture, muscle tone, and facial expressions (Hatfield, Rapson, and Cacioppo 1994). This behavioral entrainment contributes to at least two relevant effects of co-presence. The first is *emotional contagion* (Hatfield, Rapson, and Cacioppo 1994). It is well known that certain affect-laden behaviors (laughing, yawning) are socially contagious (Provine 1996), but our influence on each other's affective states is much more pervasive than these examples imply. In large co-present groups, certain moods and affects are likely to become shared and widespread, as the field data on hysterical contagions attests (Kerckhoff and Back 1968). Thus, whatever its actual content, the mood of assembled groups is likely to converge and feedback, intensifying and spreading to all assembled members. A further result of entrainment is *rapport*. To the extent that this synchrony occurs smoothly, the result is not only mood convergence but also a sense of bonding and liking (i.e., belonging) among those entrained (Hatfield, Rapson, and Cacioppo 1994).

Practices

Despite its myriad effects, co-presence alone does not a ritual make. When people come together in the face of anomaly or during transitions and renewals, they typically come together and *do* something. And, despite superficial differences, what they do is ultimately some combination of a mere handful of common practices.

As Durkheim ([1912] 1995), among others, has emphasized, one of the principal underlying themes uniting ritual practices is that they all exert some form of control on attention (Goffman 1967). Indeed, for Collins, the focusing of attention is the primary and essential factor in creating ritual effects (Collins 1988:193). Attentional control and focusing is a crucial aspect of ritual practice in at least two ways. First, the control of attention has positive effects on participants' subjective state. Aversive self-awareness is only one manifestation of attention's fugitive nature. Attention can display an irksome degree of autonomy, distracting us from work, keeping us from sleep, and dwelling on things we would sooner forget (Wegner 1989). This too is aversive, while its obverse—controlled and focused attention—produces a range of positive subjective states, collectively referred to as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The extent to which common means of escaping self-awareness and achieving flow converge with typical ritual practices is striking. Both Baumeister (1991) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) recognize this convergence and cite ritual participation itself as a significant means to these ends. Second, the actual target or content of this attentional focus plays a vital role in the channeling of belonging and belief. Given this dual importance, the focusing of attention will figure prominently in my discussion of ritual practices.

Positive and Public Rites

In the case of positive and public rites, a common means of arresting attention is via *spectacle*. The fires are lit, the finery put on, and the sacred objects displayed, with the effect of making the ritual focus as salient as possible. Moreover, ritual practices—including, at times, bloody sacrifices or simulated sex acts—are themselves a kind of spectacle.

Ritual participation further orders attention via the *structured activity* that proper observance requires. By some accounts, ritual is synonymous with structured, even stereotyped, activity (D'Aquili and Laughlin 1975; Lewis 1980), and the requirements of following

that structure tend to channel attention narrowly (Lex 1976; Collins 1988). It is exactly these sorts of highly structured activities that are the most often-cited antecedents for experiencing episodes of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Outside the ritual context, *ecstatic substances* are a common means of escape from the self (Baumeister 1991). It should therefore not be surprising that, from the ritual use of peyote among certain North American Indian tribes to the ritual use of coffee among Moravians, not to mention the widespread use of communion wine, the consumption of such substances is a widely practiced element of ritual. Of course, such substances also significantly contribute to ritual experience via their direct effects on subjective state.

Though it is most often interpreted along symbolic lines, the *role and status reversal* common to many rituals can also be understood as yet another means of escaping the self and thereby contributing to effervescence. This interpretation is supported by the fact that in many cases, only high-status participants fully engage in it. The chief may be berated by his subjects, but no subject gets to be chief. Marie Antoinette plays peasant girl in her *hameau*, but no peasant girl wears the crown jewels, and it is the ancient shellbacks, not the lowly pollywogs, who cross-dress during equatorial transits. This last example highlights the parallels between ritual status reversal and the practice of sexual masochism as studied by Baumeister (1991). He notes that masochism, of which ritual feminization is a common feature, is almost exclusively indulged in by successful, individualistic, high-status males, and that the strictly sexual elements of the practice are of secondary importance to the loss of autonomy and derogation that accompanies it. It is entirely possible that public ritual status reversals play much the same relief-from-self role for high-status members of the group.

The most characteristic and universal feature of positive rites is their incorporation of *rhythmic movement*. In the form of drumming, singing, clapping, swaying, and dancing, rhythmic movement figures prominently in almost all accounts of ritual (Durkheim [1912] 1995:218). As Marrett comments, "Savage religion is not so much thought out as danced out" (Marrett 1914:xxxi). All of today's world religions have rhythmic roots and offshoots, and even "deritualized" Protestantism has produced John Wesley's rhythmic "method," the ecstatic dancing of the Shakers, and the ever-rhythmic Pentecostal movement (McNeill 1995).

Such ritual activity comes as no great surprise, since physical activity itself is both a means of directing attention (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Baumeister 1991), and a means of producing endogenous opioids, which further induce effervescence (Lex 1976). What stands out, however, is the way that rituals feature not just movement, but *rhythmic movement*. A diverse body of research suggests that there is something fundamental and profound about rhythmic movement itself that creates both belonging and effervescence (i.e., ecstasy, hallucinations, analgesia, energy) (McNeill 1995). Via multiple mechanisms, rhythmic stimuli have been found to significantly impact brain functioning and to produce these very effects (Walter and Walter 1949; Neher 1962; Lex 1976; Ornstein 1977; Prince 1982), while the music accompanying this rhythmic action in itself is known to produce changes in brain functioning, attentional focus, and subjective state (Jourdain 1997). Finally, group singing and dancing are also an effective means of producing unified movement (i.e., behavioral entrainment), thereby creating rapport and its subsequent sense of belonging (Hatfield, Rapson, and Cacioppo 1994).

Private, Piacular, and Negative Rites

Among private rites, *meditation* is an interesting case because it is both the archetype of privately conducted ritual and the most explicit attempt to control ornery attention. In

both religious and secular forms, meditation attempts to quiet the attention by focusing it on an object, koan, sensation, or action. Though the methods and setting are apparently different, from the perspective of mechanisms (attentional focus, escape from self) and outcomes (ecstasy and confidence) meditation is functionally equivalent to more active and explicitly social⁶ forms of ritual (D'Aquili and Laughlin 1975; Ornstein 1977).

Piacular rites were among the most fascinating for Durkheim ([1912] 1995). While they are formally defined by their antecedent conditions (anomaly, death, crisis) and goals (atonement, expiation), they are most notable for their associated practices, which center on the self-infliction of pain and discomfort. Again, despite their disparate techniques, they produce much the same results as do less traumatic public and private rites, and for much the same reasons. Like positive rites, they are effective in part through their ability to control attention. The most basic and most effective means of attentional control is sensation. Strong bodily sensation is inimical to concentration on the self or anything else, and pain, being the most salient of stimuli, has a singular ability to blot out meaningful thought (Scarry 1985; Baumeister 1991). Because death is, as Berger puts it, "the marginal situation *par excellence*," it makes sense that it is closely associated with the most radical techniques of attentional control (Berger 1969:23).⁷ Pain and other aversive states are not unique to piacular rites, however, and are especially characteristic of initiation rituals, where they have a robust but poorly understood effect of creating belonging among those who experience them together (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

Lastly, we come to the category of *negative rites*. Negative rites involve the effortful thwarting of desire, or, as it is more commonly known, abstinence. Such rites can take the form of the vows of poverty, chastity, and hunger so common among religious virtuosos, but most ritual institutions also require at least occasional and mild forms of such abstinence from most believers. The most effortful abstinences contravene strong homeostatic drives such as hunger, thirst, and fatigue, but abstinence can be applied to any behavior the avoidance of which is inconvenient, unprofitable, or difficult (Durkheim [1912] 1995:395, 316).

Durkheim ([1912] 1995) is adamant that despite what look like unbridgeable differences in form, positive, piacular, and negative rites produce similar outcomes. With the aid of the present model, we can see that it is their effortful nature that unites all these forms at the causal level. Positive rites involve the expenditure of tremendous quantities of effort. They take time and energy away from other pursuits and often require the construction of ritual paraphernalia that must be recreated anew for each ceremony (Durkheim [1912] 1995:301). However ecstatic, hours or days of singing, dancing, and drumming take a considerable toll on participants, and to the extent that positive rites involve sacrifice, this too is effortful in that hard-won or painstakingly constructed resources are surrendered. Likewise, piacular rites require the effortful infliction and tolerance of aversive states, as elaborated above. Overlapping both positive and piacular rites, negative rites involve the effortful abstinence from desirable behaviors. In all its various forms, the effortful nature of ritual practices is fundamental to the creation of belief and belonging.⁸

⁶Although they are practiced in *private*, meditative techniques are socially transmitted and compelled; the lack of immediate co-presence in no way undermines the social nature of these "private" rituals.

⁷It bears mentioning that pain is not the only route to sensational distraction. Durkheim himself notes the eruption of an "inclination to sexual debauchery" as a parallel and co-occurring response to nomic threat and crisis (Durkheim [1912] 1995:411, 408).

⁸That it is the effortful nature of abstinence and not the abstinence itself that matters is indicated by the rarity of castration as a means of maintaining the sexual chastity required by many religious orders. Indeed, the Christian church has long held that those who subdued lust by such means were not in fact being chaste at all, and that it is the act of resistance to desire that is indicative of salvation (Griffin 2001:36).

From Behavior to Belief and Belonging

Contrary to the modern Western conception of human action as considered, purposive, and conscious, empirical evidence makes it clear that much of the time people act mindlessly or automatically, under the influence of preconscious social and emotional forces of which they are unaware and that they are unable to control (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Zajonc 1980; Langer 1989; LeDoux 1996; Wegner and Bargh 1998). Consequently, though very much affected by the ritual experience, the participant is unlikely to correctly attribute these changes to the causes traced above. Durkheim puts it this way: “[T]he ordinary observer cannot see where the influence of society comes from. It moves along channels that are too obscure and circuitous, and uses psychic mechanisms that are too complex, to be easily traced to the source” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:211).

The ironic counterpoint to our lack of accurate knowledge about the causes of our states and behaviors is our insistence on seeking explanations for them. We try to understand the causal relationships that populate our world in order to make it seem predictable and controllable, especially when faced with atypical behavior, states, or events (Zillman 1978). When this need to understand collides with our lack of insight, we attempt to locate the cause of our experience via some combination of three heuristics:

- *Cultural causal theories.* Actors and observers both draw upon preexisting, socially shared, and culturally diffused schema and expectations in making causal attributions about actions (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). In short, we tend to make the causal connections that our socialization predisposes us to see.
- *Social comparison.* Actors look to co-present others for information and validation concerning the definition and attribution of ambiguous affect and behavior (Festinger 1954; Schachter 1959; Schachter and Singer 1962).
- *Perceptual salience.* Attribution follows attention in that salient elements of the environment are more likely to be integrated into causal models than less salient but potentially causal factors (Heider 1958; Jones and Nisbett 1972; Dutton and Aron 1974). This returns us once again to the second way in which attention is of primary importance: it not only affects subjective states, but also channels attribution toward the totem.

Between the lack of accurate causal introspection and the need to account for affect and behavior, we can conclude that ritual participants will probably not attribute the effects of participation to their actual causes, and probably will ascribe their experiences to a source that is primed by their culture, is shared with their co-participants, and is the focus of ritual attention. This lack of insight, and consequent misattribution, is the hinge around which the four core mechanisms of belief and belonging creation swing.

Misattribution of Effervescence. Via the mechanisms described above, the subjective state of ritual participants is a complex admixture of arousal, ecstasy, analgesia, loss of self, and hallucination, a state Durkheim would recognize as “effervescence.” Durkheim’s model of ritual emphasizes the misattribution of this subjective state to whatever salient and tangible source is available to a participant’s senses. Thus, a totem becomes imbued with *mana*, the abstract power of society becomes objectified, and God is created. This account accords remarkably well with current psychological understandings of the attribution process. Both laboratory and field studies have demonstrated that subjects whose affective state is manipulated by situationally induced exercise, disgust, or sexual arousal

are very easily led to misattribute that state to any one of a number of alternative causes chosen ahead of time by the experimenter, ranging from the enjoyment of music and the appreciation of humor to the experience of empathy, anger, or aggression (Zillman 1978). The affect created by the ritual thereby gets attached to the participants' knowledge structures about the focal entity, creating belief in its efficacy and sacredness. The totem's apparent ability to profoundly affect the participant is a most persuasive sign of its power over the larger world. Whatever affect does not get attributed to the ritual focus gets attributed to the salient others with whom the individual is participating, thereby creating belonging.

Though Durkheim concentrates on ritual's effects on subjective states, he does point out that participants' behavior is affected as well (Durkheim 1912 [1995]). This impact on behaviors is at the core of the current theory of how ritual produces belonging and belief. It does so via three mechanisms: the misattribution of behavior, the justification of behavior, and self-perception.

Misattribution of Behavior. The participant's behavior is affected in degree, direction, and intensity by the ritual situation. Put another way, in these circumstances, she is likely to both do things she otherwise *would* not and things she otherwise *could* not. As Wegner and Wheatley (1999) demonstrate, the sense of will is variable and orthogonal to actual causation. Because it is unexpected, such ritually induced behavior is in both cases likely to be experienced as unwilled, and attributed to an external force associated with the focus of ritual attention.

On the one hand, conformity and disinhibition conspire to get the participant to do things she ordinarily *would* not do. From the shy person singing out to the victim of ritual possession, the ritual participant enacts behaviors outside of her normal repertoire. The participant experiences the "spirit working through her," and its ability to possess and move her is itself unimpeachable evidence of its power and efficacy.

The ritual situation also allows the participant to do things she otherwise *could* not do. The situation gives her the stamina, strength, and skill to accomplish things ordinarily outside her capacity. As Radcliffe-Brown notes, the ritual dancer is "able to perform prodigies of exertion" (Radcliffe-Brown 1922:253). Likewise, social facilitation of familiar ritual tasks means that she will perform them more deftly than when alone. But most impressive and convincing is the exhibition of miraculous new capabilities that sometimes occurs during ritual. If one interprets it as an ancient language, speaking in tongues is not only an unusual behavior but a preternatural skill. Similarly, the analgesia experienced during ritual allows the participant to do things that would otherwise be too painful to endure, such as fire-handling (Neher 1962; Jilek 1982).

Finally, the ritual participant can do things she is otherwise too fearful to do. The confidence produced by the ritual situation inspires the participant to do amazing things that look more dangerous than they actually are. Once she safely and successfully performs them, these actions serve as mighty testament to the powers at work. Thus, ritual practices like fire-walking and snake-handling are simultaneously an outcome of confidence, proof of confidence, and a means of creating confidence.

Justification of Behavior. We have seen that a significant common feature of ritual practices is that they are effortful. Thus, in addition to her subjective state and the novelty or anomaly of what she did, the actor must also explain the fact that she engaged in this effortful behavior at all. This gets at a major facet of cognitive dissonance theory known as *insufficient justification* (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959), the gist of which is that in the

aftermath of effortful activity, we feel the need to make sense of our actions—to justify them and to reconcile them with our beliefs and values. When the actuating reasons are ambiguous or transparent and no obvious external justification presents itself, we are forced to change our internal cognitions and beliefs in order to maintain a sense of consistency and reduce our aversive state of dissonance. In the ritual situation, this mechanism produces both belonging and belief.

In an experiment with obvious applicability to initiation and other transition rituals, Aronson and Mills (1959; see also Gerard and Mathewson 1966) investigated insufficient justification via group initiation. Subjects underwent no, moderate, or severe initiations to become members of a group. The researchers found a clear and direct relationship between severity of initiation and both liking for and valuation of the group. Put simply, the participant makes sense of her effortful behavior by subjectively elevating her attitude toward the group whose membership she so effortfully achieved. Though the relevance to transition and initiation rituals is obvious, the same principle applies just as well to any other kind of effortful ritual action—positive, piacular, or negative.

Another variant of cognitive dissonance theory, *postdecision dissonance* (Brehm 1956) affects the belief component of ritual outcomes. After behaving in a way consistent with a belief, we must justify our apparent commitment to it. One way individuals can and do accomplish this is by changing the subjective probabilities associated with the chosen and unchosen options. Thus, bettors escalate the likelihood of their horse winning after they have placed their bets (Knox and Inkster 1968; Stevick, Martin, and Showalter 1991), voters become more confident of their candidate's chances after voting (Regan and Kilduff 1988), and laboratory subjects perceive their probabilities of being assigned to a group as high when they have been induced to expend effort consistent with that group membership, even when they are made aware that the objective probabilities of such assignment are low and fixed (Yaryan and Festinger 1961). In the same way, ritual participants engaging in effortful practices similarly justify their actions by inflating their subjective confidence in the efficacy of the rite and the entity behind it. Interestingly, evidence exists that individuals spontaneously engage in effortful, binding action in the face of uncertainty as a means of reducing it (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956; Cialdini 1993).

Self-Perception. Self-perception theory (Bem 1972) assumes that actors have little actual insight about the causes of their own behavior, and that our self-images are largely constructed in the same ways our images of others are: by observing our behavior and using our implicit personality theories to interpret them and discover who we are. From this perspective, the ritual participant would be induced by the ritual situation to enact behaviors that she would later incorporate into her self-schema along the lines of "Well, I was speaking in tongues, so I must be a believer," thereby fortifying belonging by bolstering her identification as such and by increasing her sense that she is, in important ways, even more similar to those around her.

APPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE MODEL

This paper has attempted to advance the understanding of ritual practice by integrating sociological and psychological understandings of human behavior. The result is a newly invigorated sociological theory of rituals that exemplifies the advantages of such a combination. Before examining just what this combination has accomplished, it may be useful to briefly consider what it has neither achieved nor attempted—the *reduction* of

sociology to psychology. Though it utilizes psychological mechanisms to connect them, both the antecedents and the consequences of ritual practice remain patently social. Ritual occurs as a socially shared response to socially shared conditions. Its mechanisms are socially instigated and mediated, its specific forms are socially determined, and even when practiced in isolation, it is as part of a socially transmitted system of belief and practice. Most significantly, the essential thrust of Durkheim's model is maintained, since the external and coercive facticity of society remains the reality behind religion. This infusion of psychological research is less an usurping of Durkheim's sociological insight than a validation of it. I submit that if the current model is not sufficiently sociological, then neither was his.

However, the proper measure of a theory has little to do with its ability to stay within disciplinary bounds. Instead, a theory is of value to the extent that it is empirically credible, explains or accounts for observed features of the phenomenon in question, and makes new, nonobvious predictions possible. I hope to have demonstrated above that the current theory fulfills the empirical credibility requirement. In this section, I intend to examine its ability to explain and predict.

1. The Origins of Ritual

Among the most significant advantages accruing from the inclusion of psychological mechanisms in sociological theory is that by affording a viable ontology and engine, it avoids the teleology and reification that are endemic to the study of rituals and to sociology in general. Because the outcomes of ritual are advantageous to society, ritual has often been seen in a functionalist light. While functionalism is a perfectly valid theoretical tool, it is so only when accompanied by an independent model of origins. Likewise, a convincing model of ritual must also account for the motivations that compel participants' attendance, independent of the integrative, normative, or other roles it may play for society at large.

In the current model, each of the key constituent behaviors—assembly, attentional focus, and effortful action—is an apparently spontaneous and independently efficacious response to uncertainty and crisis. Even without the intention of performing a ritual per se, individuals and groups facing epistemic threat are likely to engage in one or more of these behaviors and to thereby obtain some of the benefits of ritual participation. It is no great leap to imagine that simply by chance, these elements have repeatedly co-occurred over time, and that the resulting synergistic effects on those assembled led to the repetition, elaboration, and formalization of their enactment. That these palliative effects at the individual level are accomplished by endowing the participants with socially functional belief and belonging is sociologically significant, but incidental—and probably invisible—to the participants themselves.

Collins (1988) has termed such unintended rituals “natural” rituals, and their occurrence suggests some interesting predictions and speculations. For example, we can predict that when ritual elements spontaneously occur, ritual outcomes will follow:

(1.1)⁹ Any sort of effortful behavior that is instigated or maintained via social influences is likely to produce a quasireligious hardening of the initial or associated beliefs.

⁹By no means are the predictions and hypotheses provided here exhaustive. Nor is any attempt being made at this point to argue their empirical accuracy. The goal is merely to posit and illustrate the theoretical fertility and utility of this theory of ritual, and of the social-psychological approach to theory construction behind it.

This lets us make sense of why social movements involving voluntary abstinence, such as temperance, smoking cessation, and vegetarianism, so often and easily become moralized. More speculatively, the current theory suggests that by creating large-scale “natural” rituals (i.e., by bringing large numbers of people into one place, engaging them in skillful occupations, and providing them with an effortful but nonutilitarian task), the construction of great monuments such as those at Stonehenge, Giza, and Easter Island played a crucial role in helping those societies make the transition from micro- to macrosocieties. By creating and elevating the shared senses of belief and belonging necessary to forging small disparate tribes into a true society, these monuments not only reflected the greatness of the societies that erected them, but were perhaps instrumental in creating it.

2. *The Primacy of Practices*

From the beginning, this theory has been developed with the assumption that the distinctive outcomes of ritual could be accounted for via the distinctive practices of ritual without recourse to symbolic mechanisms. The resulting model confirms this assumption, but the primacy of practices should not be taken to imply that symbolism is superfluous to understanding ritual.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the present model focuses on practice over symbols, and in doing so, it suggests that:

(2.1) Within a religious tradition, there will be more variation and change among beliefs than among behaviors.

(2.2) Religious traditions are at greater risk from contaminations of their practices than from contaminations of the content of their beliefs.

Likewise, it also helps explain the persistence of religious traditions in the face of the destructive forces of dilution and distortion to which belief is prone. A strong behavioral tradition provides a centripetal counterforce to the centrifugal forces of heterodoxy. We can therefore predict that:

(2.3) Long-lived and widespread religious traditions will exhibit more orthopraxy than orthodoxy.

¹⁰In fact, there is no way to understand ritual without consideration of symbolism. The belief and belonging produced by ritual practice are generic. To become belief *in*, or belonging *to*, requires the content that symbolism provides. By not only focusing attention, but by focusing it *on* something—usually a symbol—rituals channel the misattribution of social forces into a focal element, thereby charging it with *mana*. Recall too, that attentional salience does not determine attributions alone, as they are made in accordance with preexisting cultural expectations and the emergent consensus of the group. Thus, some ritual foci are more likely than others to become imbued with *mana*, and these inequalities in ritual potential are embedded in the larger cultural and symbolic context of the society. Moreover, although the power of the symbol initially derives from practice, once a symbol is so charged, it in itself becomes a means of inciting ritual excitement (e.g., hay burning). As cognating creatures, humans can also manipulate symbols so as to actively guide attributions. Sinclair, Hoffman, Mark, Martin, and Pickering (1994) demonstrate that arousal can just as easily be misattributed to linguistically provided ideas as to physically present objects and persons. Consequently, a leader or speaker can manipulate symbols so as to lead ritual participants to misattribute their affect and behavior in multiple and specific ways. Lastly, as per Durkheim, the identification of ritual effects with a symbolic representation plays a role in the maintenance of belief and belonging. Symbols are tangible and portable in ways that experiences are not, and thus they help the participant sustain belief and belonging on a day-to-day basis between rituals.

3. A Formal Statement of the Model

$$\text{Belief/Belonging} \propto \frac{\text{AttentionalFocus} \times [\text{Effort} + \text{AnomalousBehavior} + \text{Effervescence}]}{\text{AlternateAttributions}} + \text{Co-Presence}$$

where:

$\propto$ = “proportional to”; + = “and /or”; $\times$ = “and”

Attentional Focus = Spectacle + Structure + Deindividuation + Sensation + Meditation + Interaction

Effort = Activity + Sacrifice + Abstinence + Aversive States + Vigilance

Anomalous Behavior = Deindividuation + *Co-Presence* + Arousal + *Effervescence*

Effervescence = Ecstatic Substances + Deindividuation + Rhythmic Movement + *Attentional Focus* + Strenuous Activity + *Co-Presence* + Sensation

Deindividuation = *Co-Presence* + Disguise/Uniforms + Darkness

Alternative Attributions = Utility + Conflicting Attributional Predispositions + Conflicting Group Consensus

Co-Presence $\propto$ Similarity + Strength + Immediacy + Number

While this statement is not intended as an “equation” in the truest sense of the word, it does provide a succinct and heuristically useful way to operationalize the model and derive predictions. To begin with, the statement makes the derivation of any number of simple relational propositions self-evident. For example:

(3.1) *The strength of Belief/Belonging created by a ritual increases with the Effortfulness its practice entails.*

(3.2) *The amount of Belief/Belonging generated by a ritual is directly related to the degree of Effervescence it induces in the participants.*

But these statements also contain concise and specific hypotheses about, for example, the independent and contingent relationships between various causal factors identified here:

(3.3) *Belief and Belonging are positively affected by Co-Presence, independent of the presence or absence of any other factors.*

(3.4) *In order to produce Belief and/or Belonging, Attentional Focus must be accompanied by either Effort, Effervescence, or Anomalous Behavior, and vice versa.*

4. A Comprehensive and Extensible Theory of Ritual Practice

In addition to focusing on practices over symbolism, the present model was developed with an eye toward creating a comprehensive theory of rituals, encompassing the full spectrum of ritual forms within a unified framework that is simple, useful and parsimonious. Hypothesis 3.4 suggests how the model meets these goals: via modularity. By distilling disparate ritual practices down to the psychological mechanisms by which they work

and specifying a complete but finite set of alternative means, we can simplify and abstract them to the level at which they are functionally equivalent and interchangeable. Thus, the model can be seen to apply to positive, negative, and piacular rites by understanding that sacrifice, abstinence, and the toleration of aversive states are all effortful forms of behavior that must be justified. Likewise, a simple hypothesis such as 4.1 can be operationalized *in situ* to focus on the method(s) of Attentional Focus specific to the ritual at hand.

(4.1) The ritual generation of Belief/Belonging is proportional to the degree of Attentional Focus induced by the ritual situation.

Thus, any form of ritual—religious or secular, meditative or negative—can be understood, analyzed, and evaluated for its Belief and Belonging potential via the same model.

At some point, comprehensiveness becomes extensiveness. That is, the theory not only accounts for recognized forms of ritual, but also becomes applicable to other, less obvious instances. The social world is filled with “natural” rituals and quasirituals that create some or all of the elements of ritual practice for ostensibly nonritual purposes. For example, Durkheim argues that ritual phenomena extend beyond the religious domain and into festivals and other social events (Durkheim [1912] 1995:386–87). With this model, we can see how social events such as concerts, sporting events, and raves are, to varying degrees, facsimiles of more prototypic rituals, incorporating co-presence, attentional focus, rhythmic movement, effort, and ecstatic substances in various combinations. They, too, are thereby amenable to comprehension and analysis by means of the model developed here.

One well-known extension of ritual theory is the field of “interaction rituals.” Goffman (1967) and Collins (1988) have made much of the ritual aspects of everyday interaction, pointing out that these aspects, like more prototypic rituals, prominently feature co-presence and the focusing of attention. Thus, they not only bring into play the direct effects of co-presence on belief and belonging, but also have the potential to induce some degree of effervescence, conformity, and anomalous behavior. However, interaction rituals differ from the prototypic form in at least one important way. While interaction focuses attention, it does so not on one particular object but on a variable, intangible, and changing conversational topic. The interactants are therefore unlikely to misattribute their states and behaviors to any kind of totem; instead, they will (somewhat correctly) attribute them to what is consistently salient in their interaction—their interaction partner. In short:

(4.2) To the extent that they are forms of ritual activity, Interactions are more productive of Belonging than of Belief.¹¹

Not all evocation of ritual techniques is so “natural”; there are also many instances of quite intentional incorporation of ritual elements in social life. Specifically, both religious and secular movements and organizations that seek to attract and maintain adherents can be expected to make use of ritual techniques to produce belief and belonging, even without understanding just why they are effective.

¹¹Interaction rituals can and do produce belief, partly via the conformity and attributional channels central to this model. However, their major influence on belief takes place via other means. The interactive nature of such rituals means that more direct and intentional means of belief construction and maintenance are primary. Also, although they *can* produce belief, the flexibility of dialectical interaction means that it can equally well be used to deceive, manipulate, persuade, and undermine belief. Though compatible with the model here, such mechanisms fall outside of its intended purview and arguably outside the domain of ritual per se.

(4.3) Enduring voluntary organizations and movements will consistently and prominently feature elements such as regular ritual assembly and ongoing effortful behavior such as abstinence and sacrifice.

(4.4) Organizations that require high degrees of Belonging and Belief from their members will exhibit and demand particularly high degrees of ritual behavior from those members, including severe initiation and significant ongoing feats of Effort and /or abstinence.

In this way, our model helps make sense of why secular organizations from sports teams to skinheads to SEAL teams resemble both each other and religion groups so closely, why abstinence is such a universal feature of organizational membership, why revolutionaries and revolutionary movements are traditionally ascetic, and, contra Iannaccone (1994), the real reason why “strict churches are strong.”

5. Functional Substitution

The modularity of this model invites consideration of the role of functional substitution in ritual practice. We have just seen that from the perspective of this model, different techniques of achieving effervescence (for instance) can play the same role in producing ritual outcomes and are in this sense interchangeable. Thus, we can expect that when circumstances make one ritual mechanism unavailable, successful rituals will substitute a functional equivalent from the finite set of alternatives indicated by the model. For example, at the most micro level, deindividuation has thus far been considered only as a product of co-presence, but it is also produced by darkness or the use of masks, disguises, or uniforms (Diener 1979; Prentice-Dunn and Rogers 1989). Accordingly, we can predict that:

(5.1) Rituals will often take place at night or in darkened rooms, and will often involve the use of various forms of disguise.

(5.2) The smaller the number of persons participating, the more likely the use of darkness and disguise are.

(5.3) When some subgroup of the participants is especially salient in the ritual situation, that group will likely be equipped with masks, disguises, or uniforms.

Thus, deindividuation helps us understand why rituals are typically carried out in darkness (Durkheim [1912] 1995:218), why the alteration of appearance is such a major part of initiation and other ceremonies (van Gennep 1908; Durkheim [1912] 1995:220; Turner 1969), and why some ritual participants (e.g., the clergy and the choir) are robed while others are not.

The idea of functional substitution is also applicable at a more macro level. The functional equivalence of positive ritual activity and negative ritual abstinence lend themselves to an interpretation of Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis ([1930] 1992), which stresses the achievement of a common outcome (confidence of one’s own salvation) through different, though functionally equivalent, means. As Protestant reformers abolished the positive rites and practices that were so characteristic of the Catholic Church they were rejecting, the asceticism that came to characterize Calvinist Protestantism was among a small group of viable functional equivalents available to them as means of generation of belief. From this

perspective, the Protestant Reformation can be understood as a substitution of an emphasis on negative ritual practices for an emphasis on positive ones.

At the most macro level, ritual itself is one among a handful of means of producing belief and/or belonging. Accordingly, it is a functional equivalent for other kinds of belief creation and maintenance, including scientific rationality and social plausibility structures. Since, as Berger (1969) points out, a major effect of modernity is the undermining and dissolution of strong plausibility structures and a greater heterogeneity of belief, perhaps it should not be surprising that ritual-intensive forms of religion and other beliefs should be on the rise.¹² Lacking the general consensus and epistemic networks that once made them viable, believers turn to rituals as means of sustaining belief. Similarly, we can also predict that:

(5.4) Among voluntary groups and movements, the prevalence of ritual practices will be inversely proportional to the correspondence of their beliefs and assumptions to those of the prevailing, mainstream culture in which they live.

For such groups, rituals provide buffering and bolstering of their beliefs in the absence of the consensus and plausibility structures that could otherwise support belief.

6. Distinctions

The comprehensiveness of the current model lies in its ability not only to be inclusive and integrative of all kinds of ritual, but also to make important quantitative and qualitative distinctions among them. On the quantitative side, we can see that:

(6.1) Ritual effects are additive. All else being equal, the more different routes to belief and belonging that a ritual makes use of, the more effectively it will produce them.

On the qualitative side, functional equivalence should not be interpreted to mean identity. Though they may all contribute to the same mechanisms in the end, the differences among various routes to ritual effects are important and pregnant with predictive potential. Ritual practices can differ on many dimensions, and these dimensions affect their occurrence and efficacy under different conditions. For example, recall that strong physical sensation is among the most effective means of achieving attentional focus and loss of the self. This lets us predict that:

(6.2) The use of strong physical sensation such as pain or sex will be especially pronounced in rituals and behavior surrounding the most threatening crises, such as death or catastrophe.

This makes sense of the distinctively painful practices that commonly surround funeral rites, as well as the parallel emergence of both self-flagellation and sexual license in the wake of the Black Plague.

Ritual techniques also differ in the extent to which they can be externally imposed upon, or require the initiative of, participants. Public rituals can occur “naturally,” can

¹² Thus, the model makes clear not only why strict churches are strong, but also why they proliferate when and where they do.

command attention and participation, and are subject to surveillance, while less public forms of rituals rely more upon the active and voluntary instigation and cooperation of participants and are less socially enforceable. Private rituals are also more portable and less logistically cumbersome than the more public varieties. It follows that:

(6.3) The use of private ritual techniques such as meditation will most commonly be the province of religious virtuosi.

(6.4) The use of private forms of ritual techniques will occur in conjunction with, and as an optional supplement to, more public ritual forms.

(6.5) Private rituals will be more common when and where participants in a ritual are a minority, are persecuted, and/or are widely dispersed and weakly concentrated.

We can also differentiate ritual techniques in terms of the balance of outcomes they produce. Though I have used one statement to describe the relationships of both belief and belonging to their constituent mechanisms, there are real differences in the relative contributions of various mechanisms to belief and belonging. For instance, belonging is a direct outcome of co-presence, aided by the justification of behavior and self-perception, but is less affected by the effort and effervescence that are central to the creation of belief. Therefore:

(6.6) Private, piacular, and negative ritual methods produce relatively more Belief than Belonging.

(6.7) Interactive ritual methods produce relatively more Belonging than Belief.

(6.8) Positive, public rituals are the most likely to produce both Belonging and Belief.

This kind of distinction-making extends to the microlevel as well, where the explicit admission of psychological mechanisms makes it possible to draw on a large and robust research tradition to supplement the theoretical framework presented here and make distinctions *within* variables. For example, by linking the co-presence variable to the extant research literature on social comparison (Festinger 1954; Schachter 1959) and social-impact theory (Latane 1981), we can refine our predictions about its efficacy in ritual situations:

(6.9) The ritual effects of Co-Presence increase with the number, proximity, importance, and perceived similarity of the Co-Present others.

7. New Variables—The Self and Justification

Among the most significant contributions of the explicit inclusion of psychological mechanisms in the model is the recognition of new and heretofore unnoticed mediating variables. These not only allow for fuller understanding but also suggest new research directions and predictions. One such new direction concerns the role of ritual in providing a means of escape from the self. Pointing to the relatively recent, Western, and upper-class emergence of sexual masochism and other radical means of escape from self, Baumeister (1991) argues that the self becomes more salient and burdensome with the rise of modernity.

Accordingly, he finds that where the need to escape from the self was once episodic and tied to specific threatening events, it becomes an increasingly chronic condition in modernity, and the techniques of escape from self go from being irregular and event-driven to being regular and calendar-driven. Durkheim indicates that the same holds true for religious rituals, noting that ritual behaviors are a daily occurrence in “advanced” societies, but are much less frequent among the Australian “primitives” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:220).

(7.1) The more modernized, urbanized, and Westernized a group is, the more likely its rituals are to be regular, recurrent, and scheduled, and the less likely they are to be spontaneous responses to current events.

As should be obvious from the formal statement of the model, the most important and nonobvious contribution of this model to the understanding of ritual is its prominent inclusion of the new variable *Alternative Attributions*. Identifying the psychological mechanisms by which ritual creates belief and belonging as essentially attributional ensures that the significance of potentially competing explanations comes to the fore. Put simply, if a plausible external cause of one’s state or behavior can be found, then participants will not attribute these things to the ritual focus, and the ritual’s ability to create both belief and belonging will be severely compromised. This observation has multiple explanatory and predictive implications. For starters, one definition of “ritual” is an action that is pointless (Homans 1941; Lewis 1980). While this sense of ritual is often meant in a derogatory way, from our perspective it is spot-on and hardly accidental. Ritual behavior is most effective when it has no utilitarian purpose and participants therefore cannot make utilitarian attributions for their behaviors. Consequently, we can predict that:

(7.2) Ritual behaviors will be distinctly nonutilitarian in nature.

(7.3) Useful objects or animals are unlikely to become sacred objects or totems.

(7.4) Ritual practices will be separated from utilitarian endeavors in space and time.

The current model thereby contributes a new explanatory wrinkle to the venerable distinction between the sacred and the profane. Durkheim argues that “work is the preeminent form of profane activity” and cannot be mixed with the sacred (Durkheim [1912] 1995:311). From the point of view of our model, such a prohibition makes perfect sense. By clearly separating the sacred and profane in space and time, the lack of a competing, external justification is assured, and the ritual remains effective. By forbidding any kind of even marginally productive effort on the Sabbath, orthodox Judaism provides a hard and fast monopoly on ritual attributions. Similarly, we can make sense of the widespread requirements that the products and paraphernalia of ritual—including Navajo sand paintings, effigies of Ganesh, and the *waniga* (ceremonial pole) of which Durkheim writes (Durkheim [1912] 1995:124)—be destroyed after use. The same principle makes sense of monastic practices such as weaving baskets only to immediately burn them, and moving piles of sand back and forth (Baumeister 1991), and of the injunction that the Eucharist contain no cheese, lest it become a meal. In a secular but no less ritualistic vein, it also explains that in fox-hunting the “unspeakable” pursues the “inedible”(as per Wilde), not despite the unpalatability of the latter, but because of it.

The model can also shed light on why religion typically supercedes magic. As Malinowski (1974) notes, magic rituals are performed with a particular, practical end in mind,

but religious rituals are less pragmatic. We can surmise that the impractical aspects of religious ritual means that they are more capable of inducing strong belief and belonging than are magical rituals, and thus, in the long run, are probably more enduring.

Although important, utility is only one among many competing attributions for ritual behavior and affect. As these competing attributions are usually embedded in and transmitted by culture, we can see that the model not only leaves room for cultural influences on ritual, but also suggests specific means by which they occur. By providing and privileging *this* attribution over *that* one, culture profoundly influences the imbuing of *mana*. For instance, William McNeill (1995) argues that the dancing so characteristic of social rituals has little of its former impact in the modern West because our culture privileges attributions to romantic or sexual forces, rather than religious or social ones. Though the dancer is affected by the dance, and she too misattributes its effects, her culture guides her attributions away from the religious and into the romantic sphere—which is thereby imbued with new levels of sacredness.

A related example concerns what is likely the closest approximation to a prototypic ritual in the modern world—the rave. Not only do raves make use of the full armory of ritual techniques, but they produce the same results—a strong sense of communal belonging and belief in a nascent ideology (PLUR—Peace, Love, Unity, Respect). However, raves differ from rituals in one very important way: they take place in a culture that privileges chemical influences on behavior and affect over religious ones. Thus, the raver experiences the same forces as the ritual participant, but is guided by her culture to locate their source not in a god or totem, but in a drug—one tellingly known as “Ecstasy.”

(7.5) Rituals are unlikely to produce belief and belonging in cultures that possess ready and privileged alternative explanations for the usual ritual effects.

Finally, it is possible for ritual participants to make accurate attributions about the causes of their ritual behaviors and effervescence, especially if they discover that various ritual techniques produce similar effects outside the ritual situation. Thus, we can predict that:

(7.6) Rituals will more effectively produce belief and belonging when their constituent techniques are scarce or difficult to procure or enact outside the ritual context.

(7.7) Ritual traditions will attempt to maintain a monopoly on the means of ritual production, restricting their use to the ritual situation.

As the reader can surmise, the influence of culture on ritual effects suggests that the potential for rituals to be an effective force for the creation of Belief and Belonging in the modern world is limited by the ready availability of individualistic, nonreligious, and nonsocial attributions in such a world.

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