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Introduction to the Study of Religion

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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What is a ritual?



Term Ritual

- Derives from Latin terms *ritus* and *ritualis*
- And refers to a prescribed order of a liturgy and/or of the book that describes this order
- In English interchangeable with ceremony and liturgy

- Ritual is not a universal phenomenon but a specific way to organise the world
- By studying ritual theories one can learn as much about the scholars and their system as about the human beings whose behaviour was studied (Bowie 2006: 138).

Christian rituals



Asian rituals



Pagan rituals in America and Europe



Rituals in Africa



Gender divide in one ritual?



Secular rituals?



Ritual without movement?



Ritual

- ‘a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed’ (Alexander 1997: 139, quoted in Bowie 2006: 140)
- => Rituals contain two basic elements:
performance and transformance
- Ritual is not a universal category
- Function and meaning of a ritual is not self-defined

Rite of Passage



Rites of Passage

- Types of rites of passage
 1. Baptism
 2. Wedding
 3. Graduation ceremony
 4.

Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957)



- *Les rites de passage*
(The rites of passage),
1909 in French (first
English edition in
1960)

Biography

- Important scholar about modern French folklore, founder the field of folklore studies in France.
- studied philology, linguistics, Egyptology, Ancient Arabic, religions, and Islamic culture
- Independent scholar
- From 1912 to 1915 professor of ethnography in Switzerland but generally known as independent scholar
- His most famous work is *Les rites de passage* (The Rites of Passage) (1909)

Rite of passage

- Content of book: life crisis rituals such as birth and death as well as rituals that accompany a change of status (such as wedding and initiation)
- but also non-religious events such as a journey or the university graduation are nowadays often marked by rituals

What is a rite of passage?

- ... a ritual that accompanies the transmission of a person from one social status to another throughout lifetime and marks important moments in time
- Fiona Bowie explains that 'Life does not proceed at a uniform rate, and (...) human experience is composed of stages and life crisis' (Bowie, p. 148)

Arnold van Gennep

- 'Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined.' (van Gennep, p. 3)

Three stages

- all rites of passages consist of three stages according to van Gennep:
 - 1) Separation
 - 2) Liminality (transition, limen)
 - 3) Incorporation or reaggregation

First stage: Separation

A person is separated from his or her original community, sometimes marked by rituals 'that symbolize cutting or separation in some way' (shaving off hair, seclusion, taking off shoes, washing hands or feet)

All these customs mark the separation from ordinary life, from the society and the social position one originally had.

Second Stage: Liminality

- The person stays isolated, in a limbo between two groups: -> the person is betwixt and between, neither one nor the other.
- This situation is characterized with a sense of ambiguity and confusion.
 - 'Normal rules of behaviour may be suspended or exaggerated. Inmates or initiates may be required to wear a uniform, stripped of clothing, painted, or in some other way marked out as different, special' (Bowie, p. 149).

Third stage: incorporation

- The person will be integrated in a new group with his or her changed social status.
- The person leaves the intermediate no-man's land and is again part of a larger community but with a transformed position.