

Philosophical Studies in Contemporary Culture

David Solomon  
Ping-Cheung Lo  
Ruiping Fan *Editors*

# Ritual and the Moral Life

Reclaiming the Tradition

 Springer

# RITUAL AND THE MORAL LIFE

# Philosophical Studies in Contemporary Culture

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# RITUAL AND THE MORAL LIFE

## RECLAIMING THE TRADITION

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# Chapter 1

## Ritual as a Cardinal Category of Moral Reality: An Introduction

David Solomon, Ping-Cheung Lo, Ruiping Fan, and H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr

### 1.1 The Traditional Ritual Project: The Right and the Rite

Ritual cements human life. It is not necessarily fully discursively apprehensible, as is traditional natural law or natural theology. Ritual engages prior to any conceptual thematization of its object and usually also transcends discursive statement. Ritual involves the synthesis of habit, image, symbol, movement, and emotion. It is therefore heuristic for a range of moral and religious insights. To be sure, as a central category of human existence, ritual is secondarily available for discursive appropriation. Yet, ritual is largely ignored in Western philosophical reflection. Hence, the importance of this volume: this book offers a philosophical assessment of the significance of ritual. First, this volume recognizes ritual's pre- or non-discursive character, which nests virtue and directs moral action, so that ritual can be powerfully formative of both moral and immoral action. Second, this volume seeks to assess the roles ritual can play in the pursuit of virtue by those who recognize that the collective insight and wisdom of moral traditions can serve as a positive moral resource. The examination of ritual is thus integral to understanding the possibilities for cultural renewal. Third, because this volume took shape through the engagement of Christian and Confucian scholars, it sheds light on the ways in which rituals structure these cultures and on the extent to which cardinal rituals within both these cultures are in disarray.

The dialogue from which this volume grew brought Western philosophers to confront the insights of Chinese philosophers informed by Confucian resources. The development of this work also brought Confucian scholars to encounter the thick concerns with religious ritual that characterize traditional Christianity. In different ways, each of the contributors to this volume explores the importance of ritual in the realization of human flourishing.

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The contributors examine the interconnection of rite and the right, recognizing that rituals as repeated, stylized bodily movements and/or statements bring together symbols, emotions, and moral commitments in the constitution of the moral life. The contributors to this volume appreciate that the moral world is sustained not only by major rituals that structure ceremonies but also by minor rituals that frame the etiquette of everyday life. Rituals as such are not merely practices built around internal goals such as is the case with chess. Instead, rituals are in general directed to the achievement of a well-oriented life for individuals and communities. Rituals are integral to mutual recognition and the pursuit of the good, the right, the virtuous, and the holy.

Because humans are embodied, and because the fabric of human life is richer than any discursive account can say or compass, rituals summarize, gesture to, and invoke a range of purposes and concerns that go beyond a discursive summary. Indeed, it is the supra-discursive power of rituals that gives them their range and power. Humans develop their lives through rituals, for rituals disclose more content than any easily manageable explicit account could lay out. Rituals tie individual lives to history and point to the future. Rituals have this place and function because they are manifestations of the human incarnate engagement in actions. Those who live in a substantive, transgenerational nexus of rituals are connected to complex dimensions of meaning that reach beyond themselves and their time. In contrast, relatively deritualized cosmopolitans, who seek to live apart from the control of any substantive, in particular traditional, rituals and/or who hold that it is good to taste of everyone's rituals without belonging anywhere, still possess rituals. However, their rituals are truncated, fragmented, and often misdirected (one might think of couples composing a ritual to mark their commitment to a non-marital conjugal partnership). They mark an age of moral disorientation, disengagement, cultural impoverishment, and moral banality that cries out for the civilizing support of substantive rituals.

Rituals are generally contingent in their character because they derive their particular features from the socio-historical context in which they have been framed. Hegel recognized the necessarily contingent character of *Sittlichkeit*, the higher truth of morality, by appreciating that the bonds of custom and usage supply the content of morality. It is within the context of place and history that secular morality has its substance. So, too, with most rituals. They tie the contingent to that which is essentially human, or at least to that which perennially characterizes the human condition. Substantive rituals also connect that which is merely human to that which is transcendent. We are never from everywhere and of no time, but always within a particular somewhere and sometime. The result is that moral content lives and is sustained by the particularity of ritual. Traditional rituals expand the scope of temporal connection by anchoring us in a web of moral obligations that discloses our specific moral roles as husband or wife, father or mother, teacher or student within practices that reach across generations and that have been tested over time. Ritual, though contingent

in its origins and content, has the ability to tie human passions, the passages of life, and moral concerns to communities aimed at achieving the good, the right, the virtuous, and the holy. Ritual binds us to that which endures. Yet, there is little philosophical study, at least in the West, of the significance and character of ritual.

There are historical grounds for this neglect, especially in the Anglo-American world. The term ritual in Anglo-American culture has a taste or connotation quite at odds with the generally positive connotations of the Chinese notion of *li*. In the case of *li*, the right, the rite, and what is reasonable in human conduct are bound together by concerns ranging from religious sacrifice to good form. In the English-speaking world, in contrast, ritual is a controversial term. In great measure, this critical attitude toward ritual results from low-church and free-church reactions against the ritual and cultural inheritance of traditional Catholicism. From the Reformation onward, at least in Protestant countries, there has been the view that in some sense religious ritual distorts and perverts man's relationship with God, and even with his fellowmen. This adverse appreciation of ritual has continued to the present, as is noted by Corinna Delkeskamp-Hayes (2012). As recently as 1874, in reaction to the Oxford Movement and the re-introduction of more traditional rituals into Anglican church services, Queen Victoria asked Prime Minister Disraeli to support a bill in Parliament to "put down ritualism," practices Disraeli described as "mass in masquerade" (Somervell, 1964, p. 109). The bill, introduced on August 7, 1874, went into effect on July 1, 1875. The result, the Public Worship Regulation Act, sent five Anglican clergymen to prison for excessive or improper ritualism (Bentley, 1978; Graber, 1993; Yates, 1999). This bitter dispute concerning the proper character of religious ritual occurred in a country marked by a developed court ritual and by an intricate code of social etiquette, as well as by Christians whose religions set centrally, however abridged, the rituals of baptism and the eucharist. In the face of a struggle against ritualism, ritual remained the cement of society, and of the Christian religions. Yet at the same time, there were concerns that obscured the actual scope and importance of ritual, making it more difficult in Anglo-American culture than in Chinese culture to appreciate the significance and role of ritual.

The early 20th century and especially the period around the First World War marked the beginning of a further, important rupture from the traditional ritual practices of Europeans and Americans, as well as Chinese. With the end of the Chinese empire (1911) and the martyrdom of Tsar Nicholas II (A.D. 1868–1918), there was the marked salience of what Ruiping Fan (2012) characterizes as the deritualized cosmopolitan: men cut loose from place, convention, tradition, religious commitment, and substantive ritual practices. Individuals attempted by themselves and uninfluenced by cultural norms to become authentically themselves. Such persons were not without ritual, for no one is ever without ritual. Rather, through these developments, the appreciation of ritual was deflated and the force of most rituals was restricted in scope to the present and its barest shadow. Ritual no longer drew from the distant

past or reached to the far future, much less to the transcendent. In the words of Marshall Berman, the result was “an unending permanent revolution against the totality of modern existence” (Berman, 1982, p. 30). That which was new needed always to be reformed by that which was newer. The emerging culture was progressively disengaged from the stabilizing and orienting force of transgenerational rituals. To take only one example, ever more couples now simply associate and procreate without engaging in a formal ritual of marriage (Hamilton et al., 2009). Their cohabitation and reproduction are outside of the support of transgenerational rituals, which rituals would establish their social unit as a family nested in a cultural perspective that draws from the memory of the past and looks with guidance from tradition to the future. Instead, disengaged from a defining tradition and without the benefit of a stabilizing history supported by ritual, such individuals attempt to define themselves by themselves, unconstrained by any traditional cultural context. Of course, none of this occurs without ritual. It is just that the rituals engaged in post-traditional contexts are historically impoverished, often misguided, frequently dysfunctional, and usually banal.

Compounding these contemporary challenges from the secular culture, Vatican II (1962–1965) unleashed on the Roman Catholic church a rehearsal of the Anglican turmoil of a century earlier. Traditional liturgical forms were altered and altars relocated, by commitments that engendered low-church, non-traditional results. Inter alia, Roman Catholic priests came to pray to the west, not the east (the ancient Christian form). This reversal in ritual achieved the opposite of the goals pursued by the high-church Anglican liturgical movement in the late 19th century of renewing traditional ritual forms and achieving a bond with the ancient Church. Those involved were literally disoriented. Conservative Anglicans, who had hoped to come into union with a traditional Roman church, were confounded by a Roman Catholicism that itself had become post-traditional and enamored with the ever new through its reaction against traditional ritualism. Cardinal rituals that had spanned centuries were changed, engendering a broad theological and spiritual chaos that affected not just the Roman Catholic church, but also, given Roman Catholicism’s prominence, most mainline Western churches and Western culture generally. The result was that all that seemed solid appeared to melt into air. In a world of permanent reformation, if not cultural revolution, the constraint and direction of ritual came once more to be seen by many in a negative light, recalling Disraeli and Queen Victoria in their reaction against the “excessive ritualism” of high-church Anglicans. The stabilizing force of ritual was compressed to the narrow scope of ever more isolated individuals endeavoring to imagine the liturgy *de novo*. To regain direction, Western culture as well as the culture of China will need once more to take ritual seriously, expand its scope, and restore its traditional character so as to connect with the resources from the tradition – a point made by most of the contributors to this volume.

## 1.2 Taking Ritual Seriously

This volume grew out of two small research conferences, the first held July 5–7, 2006, at Hong Kong Baptist University, and the second held November 18–19, 2007, at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. These meetings gave the authors the opportunity to present their ideas, to engage in critical exchange, and to rewrite their papers in the light of the discussions and of subsequent editorial direction, the latter spanning nearly four years. The discussions supported reflections on how and to what extent Confucian ritual still maintains its integrity, can still maintain contemporary Chinese culture, and even retain a religious core. Discussions of the former cluster of issues engendered disputes among the Chinese scholars as to the significance of religious ritual and the importance of the recognition of the transcendent for the integrity of Confucian rituals as a whole. In particular, questions as to whether Confucian ritual recognizes a personal God engendered an impassioned debate among the Chinese scholars. Many of these discussions addressed the significance of the religious rituals in which the emperor himself engaged and their contribution to the integrity and force of Confucian rituals as a whole.<sup>1</sup> The chapters in this volume were repeatedly recast through conversations and correspondence until they achieved their current shape. The result is a volume that with philosophical seriousness examines the rich ways in which right action, symbolic meaning, the life of virtue, and the experience of the holy are sustained through substantive, transgenerational ritual engagement.

This volume reflects the fruit of a dialogue between the Chinese appreciation of the core character of ritual and the traditional Christian appreciation of the centrality of the liturgy. Confucians were pressed by Christians to be open to the place of religious ritual in focusing Confucian rituals as a whole. Confucians helped diagnose the blindness of most Western cultural reflection to the ubiquity and centrality of rituals. This volume offers the possibility of looking afresh at ritual as a central dimension of man's relationship with reality. The contributors also recognize that rituals can, but need not, allow the connection of the transient with the enduring. Rituals can bind the present with the past and the future, and the immanent with the transcendent. Of course, in their post-traditional forms, rituals can separate persons from the transcendent and focus

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<sup>1</sup> There is an extensive literature regarding the role of a personal God in Chinese thought and of the obligation to worship Him. This literature goes back at least to Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and James Legge (1815–1897) (Ricci, 1986; Legge, 1852, 1881, 1960). It addresses the role of God in the rituals and in the moral commitments of Chinese culture. There is even a contemporary response by Chinese Christians to the remarkably central role played by the ritual recognition of the Shang Di, the High God, within imperial Chinese culture and ritual practice. See Chan (2006). It should be noted that the interaction between Christianity and Chinese culture reaches back at least to the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618–906) but very likely even earlier, as Orthodox and then Nestorian missionaries came to China. The materials from this history are only partially and incompletely available in English. See Riegert and Moore (2003), Palmer (2001).

attention on the individual and transient. It is such differences in the function of rituals that lie at the core of the divide between substantive and impoverished rituals. Each of these essays in different ways ties its account of rituals to the question of the place of rituals in sustaining a rightly-ordered culture.

The first section of this volume opens with Ana Iltis (2012) exploring how rituals create and sustain social reality. In her essay, she examines the force of rituals in establishing and re-enforcing social expectations, relations, and roles, by inviting participation in social structures and practices, by securing individuals within the social reality of a community, and by disclosing the significance of the cardinal passages of life from reproduction to death. Noting how the literature has distinguished among various categories of rituals, Iltis appreciates that rituals discover, create, and sustain a moral fabric. They also announce and defend social boundaries. As a consequence, no human and no human community is ever without ritual. The subsequent contribution by Engelhardt lays out how rituals possess expressive, evocative, performative, educative, and transformative functions (Engelhardt, 2012). They express a view of reality, values, and social relationships. They evoke attitudes, commitments, judgments, feelings, and forms of behavior. They are socially performative in creating social reality. They educate and train individuals in how to respond to moral, social, and metaphysical reality. In addition, as Engelhardt points out, religious rituals can themselves transform reality. For traditional Western culture, the cardinal examples of the latter rituals are baptism and the eucharist. Given the centrality of the eucharist, the ritual of rituals has been the Christian Liturgy. Mark Cherry's account shows how a reflection on rituals supports the insights of Orthodox Christianity, which is the most ritual-rich form of Christianity and which recognizes in substantive rituals the intimate interconnections between humans and the transcendent (Cherry, 2012). Orthodox theology is at its core liturgical. Cherry further illustrates and examines the moral function of ritual through the recognition that an appropriate system of rituals is necessary for human flourishing.

Griffin Trotter closes the first section of this volume with an investigation of the place of ritual in medicine (Trotter, 2012). Here again the general animus against many traditional ritual forms in contemporary Western culture has had an important impact, in this case one augmented by commitments to biomedical materialism. The result is a marginalization of the role of rituals in healing and their replacement by a medicine that conceives of health and the human condition in reductive terms. In this context, the knowledge claims of physicians and scientists displace those of theologians and saints, constituting a moral perspective that situates humans in a lifeworld whose scope is narrowed and in which an ultimate orientation is lost. One faces suffering and death without a point of ultimate orientation or therapeutic ritual support. Trotter identifies an important cultural consequence of the failure to appreciate the sustaining force of ritual: one cannot effectively draw on the therapeutic force of ritual.