

Speaker 1:

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Speaker 2:

Thank you for calling 1-800-REL-HELP. How can I help you?

Speaker 3:

Hi, there I'm a religious study student and we often talk about ritual in the study of religion. But what I've noticed is that in many of our discussions about ritual, we often lack a clear definition and understanding of what ritual is. So I'm wondering, what are we talking about when we talk about ritual?

Speaker 2:

That's a great question. As I'm sure you've noticed, there are many scholars who wrote extensively about ritual, such as a Émile Durkheim, Arnold van Gennep, and Victor Turner, to name a few examples. So it could be really helpful to refer to those early scholars and how they conceptualized ritual. But to answer your question, I'm going to use the work of ritual theorist, Ronald Grimes. According to Grimes, events should not be demarcated as ritual or not-ritual. Instead, he invites us to understand events and actions as displaying degrees of ritualization.

Speaker 3:

What does that mean?

Speaker 2:

Grimes says that means actions are not binary, either ritual or not-ritual. Instead, there is a continuum and events are more or less ritualized depending on the qualities that appear in them.

Speaker 3:

Okay, but that doesn't really tell me what ritual is.

Speaker 2:

Right. So let's move to a definition of ritual. According to Grimes, ritual is embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment.

Speaker 3:

Those are big words.

Speaker 2:

They definitely are. So let's break down this definition. Ritual is embodied. This means that ritual involves direct human action. People do rituals with their bodies. In other words, bodily action and movement are required to create ritual action. Ritual is condensed. Here Grimes is using a metaphor to

highlight that ritual action is dense, tightly packed, and requires careful unpacking to make sense of it. Rituals often have layers and require careful examination to fully understand it.

Speaker 2:

Ritual is prescribed. This means that ritual action is to be performed in a particular way and order. The idea that ritual is prescribed implies that there is a right and wrong way to perform ritual and opens the possibility for ritual failure.

Speaker 2:

And finally, ritual is enacted. In other words, ritual is an action, but not an ordinary action. To enact implies a different kind of action, an action that is special and separate from ordinary actions.

Speaker 3:

Okay. That makes sense to me. Thanks for breaking it down. Now that I understand the definition of ritual, do you think you could share some examples of different types of rituals?

Speaker 2:

Sure thing. There are many different kinds of rituals. Catherine Bell, another a prominent ritual theorist, developed a comprehensive list of what she calls the basic genres of ritual action. One of the most common rituals are rites of passage, or lifecycle rituals. These are rituals that mark a transition from one life-stage to another. Birth, the onset of adolescence or adulthood, marriage, and death, are pivotal life events that are often marked with by ritual action. Let's brainstorm together. Could you think of a life cycle ritual that you recently experienced in your life?

Speaker 3:

Good question. Well, I recently graduated from high school and the whole prom experience seems to fit the definition of a ritual.

Speaker 2:

Yes, that's an excellent example. High school prom is a hugely important rite of passage in the lives of any north American teenagers that marks the transition out of high school and into college or professional life. And it is a highly ritualized moment that begins with elaborate prom proposals, outfit shopping, and the actual prom itself. Great example.

Speaker 3:

So other than rites of passage, what other kind of rituals are there?

Speaker 2:

In addition to life cycle rituals, Bell includes calendrical rites, rites of exchange or communion, rites of affliction, feasting, fasting, and festivals, and political rites on her list of basic genres of ritual action.

Speaker 3:

Great. But back to the example of my high school prom, that's not necessarily a religious ritual, so ritual doesn't have to be religious, does it?

Speaker 2:

You're at absolutely right. Although most, if not all, religious traditions incorporate ritual in some capacity, ritual is not exclusively religious. We are surrounded by non-religious ritualized moments. In keeping with the high school graduation theme, think about the graduation ceremony. This is a highly choreographed and ritualized moment that has nothing to do with religion. So ritual can be religious and associated with a religious tradition, but it is not a requisite of ritual.

Speaker 3:

That makes sense. Okay, so what's the point? What can we learn from studying ritual?

Speaker 2:

Ritual is not a set of benign actions. Rituals carry, meaning and value, and the point of studying ritual is to understand the implication of a particular ritual. Because ritualized action carries meaning, it is important to unpack the meaning of ritualized action. I'm going to use a different example to illustrate this point. Let's talk about gender reveal parties. You know, those parties where expecting parents share the gender of their unborn baby?

Speaker 3:

Yeah. I actually went to a gender reveal party last month.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. They have really become quite popular in the last decade or so. They typically involve gathering family and friends to reveal the gender of the baby, usually by cutting a cake and the inside color of the cake reveals the gender of the baby. Or some folks use some sort of explosive device to release blue or pink confetti to reveal the gender of the child. This ritualized moment tells us a lot about understandings of gender and sex. And I would argue, works to cement the mistaken connection between sex and gender identity and erases the possibility of gender fluidity.

Speaker 2:

Gender reveal parties function to maintain dominant discourses about sex and gender. So upon closer examination, a seemingly innocuous ritual action, the gender reveal party, can tell us a lot about underlying values of a particular community or society more broadly.

Speaker 3:

Wow. I never would've thought that we can learn so much by studying ritual. This has been a really eye opening conversation. Thanks so much.

Speaker 2:

You're welcome. And thanks for calling 1-800-REL-HELP.

Speaker 4:

1-800-REL-HELP is an American Examples production at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama and is funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. This episode was produced by Lindsay Jackson, Sonya Hardwood-Johnson, Jack Bernardi, and Erica Bennett. A video

This transcript was exported on Nov 02, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

version of this podcast is available on YouTube, just search "American Examples". Find out more about American Examples at our website, [americanexamples.ua.edu](http://americanexamples.ua.edu). Also, follow the Department of Religious Studies on Twitter and Instagram at the handle [studyreligion](#), or on Facebook at [facebook.com/rel@UA](https://facebook.com/rel@UA).

Speaker 6:

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Speaker 3:

Those are big words.