

2006

## Ritual and Religious Tradition: A Comparative Essay on the use of Ritual in Christian, Jewish and Hindu Practice

Joshua Clark  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion>



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Clark, Joshua (2006) "Ritual and Religious Tradition: A Comparative Essay on the use of Ritual in Christian, Jewish and Hindu Practice," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 6 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol6/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Denison Journal of Religion by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

# Ritual and Religious Tradition: A Comparative Essay on the use of Ritual in Christian, Jewish and Hindu Practice

*Josh Clark*

Contrary to common-sense expectations, rituals are not, in most cases, the product of affluence and leisure. Indeed, they seem to be born out of necessity, like an invention of that stern mother; and the people who best know that life is difficult are the ones most likely to cleave to ritual and make it work for them.

*Tom Driver,  
The Magic of Ritual, p. 5 (re-issued as Liberating Rites).*

For many, the existing structures of society are adequate, fulfilling, and just. However, the lives of others are plagued by cruelties and injustices. Furthermore, everyone experiences a degree of uncertainty and confusion within their lives. No matter how hard one tries, predictability and consistency can be quite difficult to find. We are individuals living within much larger spheres of culture and influence, yet it is very easy to become isolated and feel powerless in the face of much more powerful forces of nature and society. Our very origins even remain a mystery. We therefore long for control and understanding and use religion and its associated rituals to connect ourselves to something larger and pursue the questions whose answers are not readily apparent in our lives. Rituals are symbolic practices that guide religious understanding by connecting the devotee in a physical way with the abstract meanings of his/her religion and therefore serve to empower the devotee with an increased sense of control in his/her own life.

The introductory quote captures the significance of ritual by understanding its increased necessity in times of despair. Despair can appear when faced with cruelty and injustice, or through the utter confusion and instability one experiences when confronting the harsh reality that our lives are unpredictable and often unexplainable. During these elevated times of despair, people feel helpless and

God may feel distant and inaccessible. Yet, these times of hopelessness are when God is the most necessary. This is when people need the most guidance and support. They need the hope and certainty that their actions matter. In short, people in a state of helplessness and confusion may despair for their self-efficacy. Rituals in this sense allow one the ability to feel as though he/she is making a connection with God and is living in accordance with his/her message despite how difficult life may seem on the surface. Rituals, seen in this light, are far from being “the products of affluence and leisure.” They are essential actions that give people in their most dire straights the ability and power to connect to something larger and to affect the world in which they live. Not surprisingly, rituals function similarly in this way in a variety of different religious traditions: in pursuing moral boundaries in Christian ethics, in contemporary Judeo/Christian tradition, in the biblical traditions, and even in Hinduism.

### **Womanist Theology and Ritual**

The black American womanist Katie Cannon has viewed the importance of ritual within her very distinct perspective. She roots her theology intimately within the poor black female experience. Its history has fundamentally shaped her existence. She understands this perspective to have been shaped historically by three distinct forms of oppression: racism, sexism, and classism. Even today, the dominant structures of society foster de facto if not still occasionally overt oppression against poor black females. Mainstream America still has not heard and completely acknowledged the voices of poor black women and their struggle. Consequently, the moral boundaries of contemporary American society do not understand and respect the condition of poor black females. Poor black women have yet to be included within the moral community of mainstream contemporary American society. As Cannon states clearly in her introduction, “The problem of the twentieth-first century is the problem of the color line, the gender line, and the class line” (Cannon 25). This understanding is made possible by her intimate connection with this perspective.

However, only when Cannon understands this oppression to be part of a long tradition does she fully understand her past and see how slavery’s legacy is still alive. Cannon cites Shirley Anne Williams who says this is like searching through:

Our mother’s gardens, it’s not really to learn who trampled on them or how or even why – we usually know that already. Rather, it’s to learn what our mothers planted there, what they thought as they sowed, and how they survived the blighting of so many fruits (Cannon 27).

Not only can poor black women profoundly learn about themselves by understanding their historical context, but they can also find strength and inspiration here. Learning about one's historical context connects him or her to a larger tradition, similar to accepting a religious tradition.

For Cannon, the ritual of story-telling functions as a way of learning about her "mother's garden." Story-telling is not just a pleasurable recreational activity; it also serves to pass along the history of a people. Hearing stories of one's ancestors helps guide a person's understanding of him/herself. It also sheds light on the present structures of society by giving an account of what precipitated the present order. Katie Cannon understands that the dominant structures of society have long ignored the voice of poor black women, and thus the official written histories of America (at least until the very recent) can not be looked to as adequate understandings of the history of poor black women. Story-telling was the only means of passing down the history of a people whose existence has constantly been attacked. Therefore, slaves would tell stories and sing songs in the field not just to pass the time, but to pass vital information. The oral history allowed the culture to survive and progress. These stories connected the listener to a tradition broader than him/herself. By passing these ideas along they could be built upon and the culture could be kept alive and dynamic.

Cannon only understands this oral history through the stories she heard from her grandmother, aunts, and her own mother. These stories ritualistically kept alive a culture in the face of oppression. For Cannon then, story-telling did not just provide meaning for a person's life, but it also provided a source to rebel against oppression. White society may have dominated poor black women for many centuries, but the ritual of story-telling has kept their culture alive and flourishing and has helped instill the strength to rebel against the dominant society. In fact, the ritual of story-telling in poor black women is itself a rebellion against the dominant society, because during slavery blacks were forbidden to learn to read or write; only through story-telling could their voices be heard and their stories kept alive. For Cannon, these poor black women telling stories "serve as contemporary prophets, calling other women forth so that they can break away from the oppressive ideologies and belief systems that presume to define their reality" (Cannon 56).

Religion absolutely depended on story-telling and oral history to survive and flourish. Since slaves were systemically denied the pursuit of knowledge and religion, they depended upon oral communication to keep their religion alive. Through singing bible phrases while working in the fields, Cannon proclaimed that they gained "emotional poise and balance in the midst of their oppression"

(Cannon 48). Thus, as the white population was attempting to strip the slaves of their humanity and their inner strength, reciting bible passages allowed the slaves to reassert their spirituality and reclaim their humanity. Cannon quotes Benjamin Mays, the slaves “sang, prayed, and shouted their troubles away” (Cannon 48). This allowed them to resist the effort by the whites to define the blacks existence.

Needless to say, story telling is much less of a necessity in the white culture as that culture has always had access to books and other forms of records in order to pass down their information. Additionally, the history of white culture in America has also not experienced the profound threat to humanity experienced by the black culture. Thus, the white culture has had less of an urgency to assert itself and maintain its religion.

### **Holocaust and Ritual**

Ritual has been used similarly in contemporary Judeo-Christian tradition. Although not plagued continuously by the threat to humanity and oppression faced by the black community in the United States, there have still been several instances when the same type of oppression and evil has been acutely manifested elsewhere. One of these instances occurred during the Holocaust. The Jewish scholar Melissa Raphael extensively studied the stories of those who perished in the concentration camps in order to understand how female prisoners kept religion alive despite the incredible attack on humanity they experienced in the camps.

She understood the Holocaust to be evidence that indeed the traditional patriarchal God of the Old Testament did not exist. However, this did not inherently lead to an atheistic philosophy. She argues that “it was a patriarchal model of God, not God-in-God’s-self, that failed Israel during the Holocaust” (Raphael 5). Instead:

It is a Jewish feminist theological revision of the immanent God as Shek-hinah (the traditionally female image of the indwelling presence of God) which helps us to trace God’s redemptive presence in Auschwitz in ways which do not entail divine or theological complicity with evil. (Raphael 5).

What she uncovered throughout the horrors of the Holocaust was a feminine relational image of God who acted despite the evils and oppression in the camps. This God was manifested through the relational and compassionate acts of caring and cleaning exhibited among many of the women at Auschwitz.

The camps’ filth pervaded the prisoners’ lives. They were constantly covered in dirt and mud, and the dirt often hid the prisoners’ faces. This was one of the tools used by the Nazis to attack the prisoners’ humanity. By concealing their

faces, the prisoners' distinct features and through it a symbol of their humanity was also hidden. Therefore, wiping off their faces served not just to keep cleanliness, but to reassert their humanity and their individuality. This became an extremely important ritual among the prisoners. Through cleaning, they allowed their humanity to re-emerge, and with the re-emergence of the women's faces, Raphael argued that God herself reappeared. This God was a compassionate and relational God who could only emerge when the prisoners cleaned and cared for themselves and each other. Thus, through the ritual of cleaning the women were asserting themselves and their spirituality.

Women would also care for each other's wounds and sicknesses with what little resources they had. They were caring for the most precious gifts God had given them: their own bodies. They were asserting what control they still retained in their lives. These acts of caring and cleaning provided the tangible needs of health and cleanliness in a setting where people lived in filth and disease, and were riddled with injuries while also functioning to resist the oppression of the camp.

Similar to the black female slaves who were attempting to assert themselves and their identity in the face of the evil of slavery, the Jewish women, condemned to die and whose humanity was in danger of being stripped in the concentration camps, also asserted their identities and their humanity through the ritual acts of cleaning their space, cleaning each other's faces, and caring for each other's wounds. By doing so, they were rebelling against the Nazi's attempt to dehumanize them. Survivor Olga Lengyel described the importance of this ritual:

No spectacle was more comforting than that provided by the women when they undertook to cleanse themselves thoroughly in the evening. They passed the single scrubbing brush to one another with a firm determination to resist dirt and lice. That was our only way of waging war against the parasites, against our jailers, and against every force that made us its victims (Raphael 69).

These acts allowed them to resist being defined by the status quo of the camps. Through ritualistic cleaning and caring, the female prisoners regained their self-efficacy in the camps yet were still able to move beyond the conditions of the camp into a reality in which God was alive. These rituals would not have been necessary had their identity not been under attack. The Nazi movement had as its goal the utter destruction of the Jewish people, yet even in the face of this threat, the acts of cleaning and caring kept their voices alive, just as story-telling did for the poor black women throughout America's history.

## **The Biblical Tradition and Ritual**

The Biblical tradition also tells of rituals used to connect people with God. The most significant event in the Old Testament, according to the author Paul Hansen, was the exodus event. This event set up the covenant between the Israelites and Yahweh that would provide the basis for the rest of the Bible. In the exodus event, Yahweh compassionately and righteously reached down to the poor slave population of Israelites and freed them. He gave them the opportunity to create their own egalitarian community with no class boundaries. By freeing them, he established a covenant where he would continue to be their protector as long as they followed his example of righteous compassion illustrated in the exodus.

However, even after being freed from slavery life was rough for the Israelites. Although slavery was brutal, at least it provided structure in life. Slaves knew when, where, and how they should act. Everything was decided for them. With freedom, the Israelites faced a myriad of choices that they were not necessarily prepared to make. Life was tough and confusing. They were not sure exactly how they should act. How could they keep personal relationships with Yahweh and keep order in society without any hierarchical forms of worship or civic structure? Although Yahweh had established the covenant with them, he remained only a distant source of stability whose meaning was not readily accessible in everyday life.

Although this confusion of identity was certainly not as severe as for the poor black women throughout America's history or the Jewish women in concentration camps during the Holocaust, it nevertheless created confusion and at times despair. The Old Testament was a time where people were just barely making enough food to live on. Life was dominated by hard work, and death was constantly knocking on the door. Therefore, the ritual of Passover emerged in the Old Testament as a practice that reminded the Israelites of the covenant they made with Yahweh.

The Passover ritual has many tangible benefits of course. It functions to bring the community together for socialization and feast. However, by reminding the devotees of the covenant made with Yahweh, it also had profound symbolic benefits. Paul Hanson describes this reminder as "a constant source of renewal and reorientation" (Hanson 56). This reminded those who celebrated Passover that Yahweh freed the slaves out of a sense of righteous compassion. By doing so, he thus instilled in the Israelites the obligation to behave similarly. The Israelites should care for their poor, sick, and marginalized people. The Passover also kept alive the memory that the Israelites were once themselves marginalized people; therefore, the artificial boundaries one may feel between him/herself and a poor

oppressed person elsewhere are merely superficial. All Israelites have slave roots and thus cannot consider themselves distinct from any oppressed person.

The Passover also reinforced for the Israelites the power of Yahweh. He was able to perform many miracles in freeing the Israelites from slavery. Thus, those who celebrate Passover remember Yahweh's power and that only he is the sole sovereign entity. No other gods or pursuits should be placed in the way of worshipping Yahweh.

All of these symbolic benefits of the Passover ritual reminded the Israelites of their roots and how they should act in the present. The Passover functioned to instill stability and understanding within the Israelites during a time of confusion. Regardless of how difficult life was, the Israelites could still know where they came from, how they should act, and who they should place faith in. For Hanson, it is "the central reenactment of the foundational event of the early Yahwistic community" (Hanson 201). Therefore just as poor black women in contemporary America can ground themselves in their past through the ritual of story-telling, the Israelites in the Old Testament could understand their own past and subsequently their present through the ritual of the Passover. This was hugely comforting and therapeutic for a people despairing over the reasons for the difficulties of life. Passover functioned to give the Israelites the strength to continue and believe in spite of the problems of the present.

## **Hinduism and Ritual**

Hinduism, although an extremely variable tradition, has also used rituals extensively in its search for religious understanding. For Hinduism, the divine is readily accessible in everyday life. There is no utterly unknowable characteristic of the divine. Divine activity is thought to be highly representative of earthly activity and vice versa. Therefore, rituals of everyday life can be used to connect oneself to the divine. However, this is only necessary when one is unsatisfied with the reality of one's present situation. This dissatisfaction is not to the degree of the women of Auschwitz or the poor black women of America's past both of whose very humanities were being threatened. It is far more similar to the dissatisfaction seen among the Israelites in the Old Testament. The dissatisfaction addressed in Hindu rituals for the most part is one of uncertainty over the future and of the present state of reality. Therefore Hindus often pursue rituals as ways of exerting one's self-efficacy and bringing about a desired future, such as the birth of a child. Life is confusing and often unpredictable. Sometimes our actions do not seem to have predictable effects. Rituals in Hinduism therefore seek to enter into the universal

cosmic activity in order for an individual to have an effect on his/her own life and understand why events occur.

Hindus may often worship a deity by meditating in front of a statue of the deity. Because this statue is often understood to actually *be* the deity, Hindus often seek a phenomenon called *darshan*, a mutual seeing between the devotee and the deity where each actually sees the other. Additionally, offerings may be made to the deity and requests made of him/her. By doing this, the devotee seeks health, specific tangible items, or simply general happiness and fortune. These actions connect the devotee with the divine and allow them to reach beyond themselves and connect with the spiritual world while also providing control in his/her own world.

*Bratas*, or vows taken by Hindu women for a certain deity, are another example of Hindu rituals. People take *bratas* when they wish to have a child, when they want a job promotion, more money, or simply the health and happiness of one's own family. These vows can entail any number of activities, such as fasting or performing a duty during a weekly or monthly festival. Whatever they specifically entail, they generally function to connect one to a cosmic entity which in turn will hopefully have ramifications on one's material life. The author June McDaniel writes, "they are associated with the cosmic order and with dharma as fixed principles laid down by the gods" (McDaniel 30). By connecting to the cosmic order, they give "active control of events" (McDaniel 30). These rituals instill control and self-efficacy in one's own life, despite the seemingly confusing and mysterious nature of the future.

These rituals are different from previous rituals mentioned in this essay due to the Hindu conception of the cosmos. The previously discussed rituals have tangible as well as symbolic benefits. However, in Hinduism, because it largely understands there to be no dualities on earth and thus the material and the divine worlds are not distinct, the tangible benefits and the spiritual benefits are much more closely related. The spiritual benefits should bring about the tangible benefits, because the tangible world is a function of the spiritual world. For example, in the ritual of *darshan*, more than a merely symbolic act, the devotee actually understands the deity to be residing within the statue that he/she is praying to. The previous rituals discussed in this essay did not understand quite such an intimate connection between the tangible and the spiritual worlds.

However, just as with the rituals discussed in Cannon, Raphael, and in the Old Testament, Hindu rituals would not be necessary if Hindus did not feel a sense of helplessness and confusion in their lives. Moreover, rituals in Hinduism become more necessary the more difficult one's situation is, because he/she is

more urgently in need of material goods. For example, rituals may be more urgent for a poor Indian woman than a wealthy Indian woman, because the poor woman is much more desperately in need of health and wealth than the wealthy Indian woman. Therefore, the poor woman's life and well-being is far more invested in the performing of rituals. Reaching beyond her current reality through the use of a ritual is more necessary for the poor woman. Her life may be dependent upon performing these rituals if she believes that they may provide her with the wealth and health she needs to survive.

## Conclusion

All of the rituals discussed in this essay function to connect the devotee to a spiritual entity larger than him/herself. In doing so, the rituals allow the devotee's voice and identity to be asserted in times of confusion and helplessness. Life is difficult and in many extreme cases, people's very humanity is constantly threatened. Performing the rituals discussed in this essay provide one with a sense of hope that their actions do matter and that their lives are not condemned by the existing structures of the present. Rituals provide opportunities to work for a better future and reach beyond one's present situation. These rituals are not the product of "affluence or leisure" but are rather the profound necessity of one whose life is plagued by confusion and helplessness. For many of us, reality is great. It is fulfilling and maybe even easy to understand and accept. Yet for those who are not satisfied with the present reality of their existence and feel a helplessness to change them, rituals allow them to reach beyond their present states. Rituals in these cases become of fundamental importance in defining who one is and in giving the strength and confidence that one can assert him/herself no matter how difficult life may be.

## WORKS CITED

- Cannon, Katie G. *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 1996.
- Hanson, Paul D. *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986
- McDaniel, June. *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2003
- Raphael, Melissa. *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust*. London: Routledge, 2003.