

# Chapter 3

## Ritual, Virtue, and Human Flourishing: Rites as Bearers of Meaning

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### 3.1 Taking Ritual Seriously: The Philosophical Anthropology of *Homo Ritualis*

Ritual unites and it divides. In doing so, it sustains and directs. Rituals draw boundaries. Rituals affirm community and mark social differences. Ritual frames human life. Ritual is a core category of being in the world. Ritual is ubiquitous, but also often unnoticed. Nevertheless, the role of ritual in articulating a lifeworld, in sustaining and renewing culture, as well as in directing moral deportment, is relatively uncharted in the philosophical literature.<sup>1</sup> Most have placed ritual within anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches that have generally ignored the implications of ritual for moral philosophy, metaphysics, and cultural development (Frazer, 1951; Geertz, 1973; Girard, 1977; Grimes, 1982; Panikkar, 1973). Accounts tend to be more descriptive than normative.

This essay explores the central but philosophically under-examined dimension of ritual as cardinal to morality, human flourishing, virtue, and, more generally, to the rightly-ordered life of a culture. Ritual is one of the foundations of virtue. A philosophical analysis of the roles of ritual in the moral life is undertaken, with special accent on ritual as the scaffolding of virtue and culture. Attention is given to how different categories of ritual in different fashions nurture virtue and support a culture. The role of ritual for orientation

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<sup>1</sup> Among the few exceptions is Schilbrack (2004).

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to ultimate meaning is also noted (e.g., religious rituals). Because different systems of ritual are tied to different and competing cultural frameworks, the culture wars (political, social, and cultural struggles to define the public space) manifest themselves in ritual wars (e.g., cultural struggles about the place of prayer in the public space and with respect to the significance of attempts at homosexual marriage). The culture wars are in great measure about which rituals should define public interactions and the public space.

Rituals can reach beyond a particular time and beyond a local community. Rituals expand the present into the past and to the future. Through the ceremonial commemoration of historical events (e.g., Passover, Pentecost, and Texas' Independence Day [March 2, 1836]), through an appreciation of times and seasons (e.g., New Year's celebrations), and through the anticipation of future tasks (e.g., the ceremonial opening of Parliament), participants in rituals live a common reality that unites them with that which was and that which will be. Ritual functions as a primary source of education concerning the metaphysical, moral, and social commitments of a culture (e.g., the celebration of Christmas). In addition, rituals are performative acts. Rituals create social roles (e.g., the swearing-in of a governor), and embed persons in socially established roles (e.g., through a marriage ceremony rendering a man and a woman into husband and wife). They emphasize the appropriate scope of particular social roles (e.g., the Chinese capping ceremony marking and establishing adulthood, or the bar mitzvah marking and establishing a boy's having achieved the full ritual obligations of a Jewish man). Rituals when rightly ordered sustain the moral life.

Rituals can also be broken, misdirected, and poorly functioning. But there are always rituals. There are even rituals that are perversely directed to an anti-meaning, indeed to radical evil. There are black masses; there are ceremonies meant to undo virtue, initiate false virtues, and affirm evil (e.g., satanic rituals and initiations into street gangs). Such rituals should not be confused with those that negate a false claim in order to establish or restore right relationship and right order. Examples of the latter are rituals of conversion. Thus, the Orthodox Church has various rituals for receiving converts that involve rejecting previous, misdirected religious commitments. "Dost thou renounce the erroneous belief of those who think that the Pope of Rome is superior to the Oecumenical Councils, and infallible in faith, notwithstanding the fact that several of the Popes have been heretics, and condemned as such by the Councils?" (Hapgood, 1983, p. 456). Indeed, all baptisms begin with the catechumen or the godfather on behalf of the catechumen renouncing Satan, ritually underscored by spitting three times to the west. Nor should perverse rituals or rituals directed towards evil be confused with rituals that undo a positive social order in order to recognize that the social order is broken, as when a judge declares a couple divorced. There are as well curses and antinomian rituals that with malice aforethought bring meaning into question, as in Hemingway's anti-Our Father: "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name" (Hemingway, 1998, p. 291). Rituals have a power that can support the right, the good, and the virtuous, or

instead empower that which is wrong, harmful, vicious, and indeed evil, as when there are rituals that from the insight of traditionalists are recognized as both without effect and wrongly directed (e.g., rituals of homosexual marriage and the Episcopalian ordination of priestesses). Disputes regarding the right and wrong character of rituals often reflect profound disagreements concerning the human condition, the nature of virtuous conduct, and the character of human flourishing.

What then are rituals? For the purpose of this essay, a ritual is understood as a set of routinized bodily movements, possibly but not necessarily including sounds, constituting an action that is repeated and that conveys, and is meant to convey, meaning. Rituals are shorthand summaries, recognitions, and instantiations of complex fabrics of commitment and purpose. Mere routines are not rituals (e.g., washing one's hands for hygienic purposes before a meal, although such can take on a ritual force). Although rituals involve routines rich in tacit knowledge, not all routines rich in tacit knowledge are rituals. Nonetheless, all human actions are proto-ritualistic: they can be given a ritual significance. It is at least the symbolic character of rituals that distinguishes rituals from mere routines. Human actions are shaped by and carry with them fabrics of moral and metaphysical meaning. Because the human environment is cultural and because humans are symbol-users who live in complex seas of symbolic meaning, humans must be clear about their relation to the meaning of the symbols they engage. Humans through rituals render symbols incarnate and chart their place over against the often competing symbols, moral commitments, and metaphysical understandings that attempt to define the human cultural environment. Not only is language rich in symbols and meanings, but so, too, is human behavior. The symbol-rich character of human behavior can through rituals be placed within a nexus of behavioral norms and understandings of the cosmos, often expressed in rules for deportment, norms for polite interchange, and in customary and ceremonial usages. Rituals include all ceremonial acts, as well as behavioral etiquette.

In everyday life, rituals are largely pre-discursive. Images, ideas, ways of feeling, and styles of thinking are impressed on, and ingredient in, patterned (ritualized) activity, thus condensing and referencing intricate geographies of meanings (e.g., the order of a military parade) and civility (e.g., routines for greeting). Rituals have a contingency unlike the norms claimed by the proponents of natural law. They lack the reflective character of a Western Christian natural theology, although they can support a reflection on the cardinal roles of religious ritual. Ritual behavior is an epiphany of man's incarnate, symbol-creating nature, where symbols are understood as partially iconic signs that usually take shape under the impress of history and context. Most significantly, rituals have moral significance in affirming that which is morally normative (e.g., through blessings) and in creating morally endorsed structures (e.g., marriage ceremonies). Rituals in enacting or embodying values and moral commitments can serve as an induction into a life of virtue (e.g., rituals that show respect of parents can instill filial piety). However, contemporary

philosophical explorations of morality devote little attention to the place and the significance of ritual, especially ceremonial behavior. This major dimension of the embodied character and life of human values and of the symbolic character of human interaction is largely discounted. There is no developed philosophy of ritual, though there is theology of ritual in the sense of liturgical theology, an enterprise quite different from natural theology (Fagerberg, 2004; Schmemmann, 1986).<sup>2</sup> Ritual is not generally appreciated as embodying commitments, which if rightly ordered nurture virtue, and if wrongly ordered nurture vice.

This study proceeds by first exploring the conceptual geography of ritual action. In the following section, this task is further engaged through examining the linguistic complexity of concerns with ritual through comparing key terms bearing on ritual in Chinese and in English. The diversity of the roles of ritual is the focus of Section 3.3, while Section 3.4 explores how ritual provides the cement for communal activities through functioning as the scaffolding of a rightly-ordered culture in identifying, affirming, and integrating the good, the right, and the virtuous. Section 3.5 places ritual within the context of religious rites and ceremonies. It examines why religious concerns are of cardinal importance: rituals can locate the good, the right, and the virtuous in terms of the holy so as to offer orientation to ultimate meaning. Rituals function for orientation within the cosmos. The essay concludes with a brief reflection on the importance of maintaining and re-establishing rightly-ordered rituals for the preservation and renewal of culture. The challenge of defining rightly-ordered behavior, including rightly-ordered rituals, lies at the root of the moral and cultural conflicts that drive the contemporary culture wars. Because competing understandings of rightly-ordered rituals reflect competing understandings of morality and human flourishing, the culture wars express themselves in ritual wars, disputes over which rituals should define the public space.

## 3.2 *Li* and *Li*, Rite and Right

The unclarity of the intension and extension of the term ritual is reflected in the strategic ambiguity of both the Chinese and English semantics of ritual. The Chinese concept of *li*, for example, carries with it a rich framework of concerns, including “religious rites, ceremony, deportment, decorum, propriety, formality, politeness, courtesy, etiquette, good form, good behavior, [and] good manners” (Dubs, 1927, p. 113n). The meaning is both general and particular. *Li* identifies a category of action as well as specific activities. In the latter case, *li*

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<sup>2</sup> Natural theology developed at the beginning of the second millennium as an attempt to demonstrate the existence and explore the nature of God through discursive reflection apart from divine revelation. Liturgical theology involves a reflection on the character, function, and power of liturgical actions, religious ritual, primarily the Divine Liturgy (Engelhardt, 2005).

refers to particular undertakings such as the *li* of mourning, the *li* of sacrifices, the *li* of manners, so as to include concerns that compass law, morality, religion, and social institutions generally. *Li* as ceremonial usage, which is apparently the root of all meanings of *li*, has its likely origin and roots in religious observances, especially sacrifices to spirits (Cua, 2002). Its scope is broad; *li* ranges over family, community, study, state, and dynasty. Or to put matters slightly differently, *li* includes concerns with law, religion, military matters, politics, ethics, rules of propriety, and ceremonial etiquette.

*Li* as ritual gains an added scope of meaning because of association with its homophone *li* (which is written with a different Chinese character), which designates good order, and with the somewhat similar-sounding word *yi*, which designates rightness or fittingness. The heuristic ambiguity engendered by the homophonic connection between the two senses of *li* suggests a tie between well-ordered behavior and ritual as well as the ritual character of good order. On the one hand, there is the implication of the reasonableness of ritual: ritual provides a rich shorthand that summarizes clusters of reasons or grounds for common activity. On the other hand, there is an appreciation that a well-ordered individual and communal life requires a web of ritual-supported, mutual acknowledgements. For example, formal philosophical lectures, debates, and disputations are undertaken within stylized formats that announce a web of established relationships and common understandings among the participants, thus allowing relatively harmonious interactions. Ritual is a form of reasonableness, rightness, and propriety. Ceremony establishes what is well-ordered and fitting. Ritual in the Chinese cultural context is multivalent and nuanced.

The Indo-European term “ritual” is itself rich in meaning. The English term ritual is derived from the Latin *ritual* and enjoys the Latin term’s rich ambiguity in compassing religious rites (i.e., the formal procedures that structure religious observances), solemn secular offices, customs, and certain formal practices. *Ritual* in turn is grounded in the Latin noun *ritus*, whose meanings span from forms of religious ceremonies to customs and accepted usages, to norms of appropriate behavior. The Latin *ritus* for its part is the source of the Latin adverb *rite*, which identifies acting according to the requirements of religious ceremonies, as well as in a well-ordered manner. As already noted, the English word rite is a homophone of the English right as that which is proper to do, right as that which is legally required, and right as that which is morally obligatory, as well as right as opposed to left, that is, to that which is sinistral, and by association sinister. Because both rite and right focus on proper, rightly-directed action, they are related by important cognate meanings. For example, acting ritely identifies acting with appropriate form, while acting rightly identifies action in a proper manner. These complex meanings may have common roots at the origin of Indo-European languages.

Beyond or behind these semantic relationships, there is an insight shared by both Chinese and English usages that recognizes the interconnection between acting rightly and acting within and through appropriately structured rites. Just

as the right sets constraints on the pursuit of the good, appropriate rites set constraints on, and supply direction for, the pursuit of the good and the virtuous (e.g., marriage sets sexuality and reproduction within a structure of mutual obligations between spouses and to their children). Ritual declares and nurtures the right harmony among human concerns required in order to realize the goods of life and community and to achieve virtue (e.g., by established webs of rules and expectations binding parents and children, teachers and students). Ritual nurtures rightly-ordered intentions (e.g., the mutual exchange of brotherly kisses as a greeting) and develops a rightly-ordered attention to duty (e.g., a soldier's saluting his officer), thereby fostering virtue. That which is right to do and fitting to accomplish is that to which rightly-ordered rituals aim. That is, rightly-ordered ceremonies or patterned behaviors aim at that which is right and proper. The richness of the etymological fabric in Chinese and English heuristically points to an underlying social, moral, and metaphysical unity through which ritual supports that which is right, and that which is right presupposes a fabric of rituals.

The appreciation of ritual in Europe and North America is nevertheless frequently encumbered by influences from low-church Protestantism and from Kantian Enlightenment sentiments that have attempted to give Scripture or reason a radical priority over ritual. Both involve a reaction against the role of ritual in Roman Catholicism.<sup>3</sup> Both have attempted to discount ritual and to establish either more authentic or more "rational" ritual practices. Ritual may even be seen (given low-church influences) as inauthentic or as diverting from pursuit of the truth. These approaches tend to regard traditional rituals as in need of reformation or deflation in the light of critical reflection, individual responsibility, and rational choice. As a result, in the shadow of these understandings ritual is often considered mere ritual, mere hollow observance, such that ritual behavior may be judged as lacking in appropriate commitment. In these contexts, ritual has taken on a negative connotation in the West for some. So, too, the capacity of rituals to habituate moral commitments and conduct so as to direct them within the constraints of traditional ways of life is taken improperly to undermine critical reflection, personal autonomy, and proper authenticity. Such attitudes to rituals fail appropriately to recognize their capacity to nest meaning and to nurture virtue.

### 3.3 The Multi-dimensional Character of Ritual

Rituals relate humans to nature (e.g., the stylized prefatory activities of the formal German hunt; the blessing of fishing vessels), humans to each other (e.g., rituals of marriage and the conferral of citizenship), humans to spirits

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant spoke against all the ceremonies of religious worship. 2 blue Quotes on p. 106, AK VI.116.

(e.g., rites of exorcism), and humans to God (e.g., the Divine Liturgy). Rituals relate humans within families (e.g., a Southern child refers to his father as sir and his mother as ma'am) and within social organizations (e.g., a layman asking for the blessing of a priest). Rituals bring with them and sustain a rich set of values and theory-laden understandings to human interactions with nature, humans, spirits, and God. Rightly-ordered rituals exist to address all of reality, such as when setting aside relationships to evil spirits and reclaiming reality within the domain of the holy (e.g., one of the widely used Orthodox Christian pocket prayer books in English includes a ritual for the priest to bless any object; "The Blessing of Any Object," in *A Pocket Prayer Book*, 1999, pp. 118–119). Rituals give structure, meaning, force, purpose, and direction to human actions, solidify human relationships, and if appropriately ordered can cultivate virtue and undermine vice.

Rituals are expressive, evocative, performative, educative, and transformative. First and foremost, rituals, especially through their ceremonial character, express a view of reality, values, and social relationships: they declare a taken-for-granted geography or web of metaphysical, axiological, and social structures or relationships (e.g., the interaction of clergymen in an Orthodox Christian Liturgy). Second, rituals are also evocative of attitudes, commitments, judgments, feelings, and forms of behavior: they invite participants to act and feel in accordance with a particular geography of metaphysical, axiological, and social realities (e.g., the ceremony of pledging allegiance to the American flag is meant to inculcate patriotism and have its participants live in accord with a set of patriotic attitudes). Third, rituals are socially performative: they create a social reality that realizes a particular view of reality, a particular ranking of values and right-making conditions, and a particular enveloping fabric of social relations (e.g., the sheriff places an individual in a social-legal category by stating, "You are under arrest"). Fourth, rituals educate and train: they provide information and show participants how to act in accordance with, and in acceptance of, particular understandings of metaphysical, moral, social, and political reality (e.g., the ceremonial recollection of past events, as in the Passover service). Rituals can habituate to a way of life and can aid in teaching, indeed in living virtue. Fifth, some rituals are also transformative of reality. They are transubstantiating in changing the metaphysical character of what they address. Rituals do not simply create social reality and educate concerning reality, but they in some cases transform the nature of things (e.g., baptism and the Eucharist). Rituals orient their participants, engage their participants, shape social reality, educate concerning reality, convey political standing, and at times transform the very character of reality.

Examples of rituals include weddings, naming children, baptizing converts, shaking hands, voting in elections, inaugurating heads of state, anointing sovereigns, installing presidents of a university, and ordaining priests. Rituals include as well giving baby showers, churching mothers, circumcising sons, blessing houses, hosting going-away parties, exorcising the possessed, saluting

the flag, a hotel doorman's bowing to guests, holding retirement parties, conducting funerals, and burying the dead. Rituals vary in the depth and scope of the participants' involvement, as well as in the extent to which rituals carry with them a thick and all-encompassing life-world of meaning. Rituals recognize, establish, and support mutual commitments through binding their participants within and through ceremonial and quasi-ceremonial behaviors (e.g., Christmas parties given by an employer). By their stylized character, rituals evoke mutual commitments, affirm a common experience of reality, sustain an experience of interconnection while directing and educating human passions and feelings. Some rituals through their very rigor (e.g., an extended military parade or an all-night vigil in Orthodox Christian monasteries) involve human exertion, focus, and dedication, thus binding the participants in the experience of a formative common struggle. Within a life-world of meaning, co-ritualists share understandings, recognize social boundaries, express affection, and affirm a shared community.

Rituals disclose community by announcing borders, moral, social, and political. Rituals bind moral/metaphysical friends (e.g., by determining who may participate in a ceremony, as with closed Communion). They separate moral/metaphysical strangers. Rituals indicate where community does and does not exist. Rituals announce boundaries. The character of a ritual acknowledges the importance of some differences and the relative triviality of other differences (e.g., persons of all ancestry who are non-excommunicated Orthodox Christians may enter fully into the celebration of the Liturgy so that kings and slaves of all races can join together, while their heterodox kinfolk may be asked to leave: water is thicker than blood<sup>4</sup>). To be fully a member of one all-encompassing community is usually not to be fully a member in the same fashion of other communities, especially of other all-encompassing communities. Rituals sustain and announce the social geographies within communities (e.g., a gentleman opens a door for a lady) and between communities (e.g., a monk asks a heterodox to leave the nave and stand on the sinners' porch during the Liturgy of the Faithful). Rituals serve as maps and signposts of communal boundaries and expectations.

Rituals are usually nested within social practices (e.g., practices for the greeting of friends) sustained by institutions and lodged within communities (e.g., the character of the bow or of the embrace, or as in the Orthodox Church with its particular practices of greeting, such as exchanging two or three kisses),

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<sup>4</sup> Orthodox Christianity's ritual of baptism illustrates the socially performative and metaphysically transformative power of ritual. For this reason, water is thicker than blood. That is, the bonds created by water, by the waters of baptism, are recognized to be socially and ontologically thicker than those established by blood, by kinship. This is the case because the bonds of the waters of baptism among other things allow an individual and communal turn to, and participation in, salvation. The power of the baptism ritual is thus recognized to be more significant than the more transient bonds of physical, blood relationships. Beyond that, baptism is recognized as metaphysically transforming the person baptized.



through which communities experience themselves, their boundaries, and their commitments. Personal relationships, framed by rituals, sustain the narrative of a community's history, a set of expectations regarding the possibilities of moral, empirical, and scientific, and metaphysical knowledge, a cluster of understandings regarding the nature of reality, an axiology that affirms a particular understanding of the meaning of the good, the right, the virtuous, and the holy (and which endorses a particular orientation to the good, the right, the virtuous, and the holy), a taken-for-granted appreciation of who counts as exemplar knowers and rightly-ordered agents, as well as what should count as cardinal examples of knowledge and right action. Rituals focus, maintain, and nurture rich fabrics of meaning.

### 3.4 Ritual as the Scaffolding of Culture and Virtue

Words alone can never be enough. Because humans have complex concerns regarding reality's deep structure, the character of proper action, and the nature of appropriate social relations, it is usually impossible exhaustively to express in words all that is at stake and to be communicated in relationships and commitments. Rituals integrate movements, circumstances, words, and often costume in order to condense and or to summarize in incarnate fashion a complex fabric of meaning. As a result, ritual activities carry with them and render embodied thick, intricate messages communicated via intertwining images, ideas, ways of feeling, styles of thinking, spoken words, and patterns of bodily movement. Ritualized behavior provides a solution to the challenge of succinctly communicating, sustaining, and nurturing a web of metaphysical, moral, social, and political commitments. Through stylized activity, ritual orients the participants to the meaning of reality, to the nature of values, to the character of social structures, to the importance of particular social relationships, and to the rightly-ordered character of political relationships. As a result, depending on its character, ritual behavior can either support, strengthen, or undermine (i.e., through being wrongly directed) the life of a culture (e.g., exclusion or inclusion in formal events of couples living together without the benefit of marriage has broad implications for the ceremonial integration of sexuality, reproduction, and family structure).

Preserving a culture and maintaining its coherence requires commonly recognizing the structures appropriate for a well-ordered, moral, social, and political life. Rituals endorse a culture's understanding of the correct ordering of values and goals, as well as the appropriate means for the preservation of cardinal human social relationships (e.g., the bonds between husbands and wives; parents and their children), the realization of virtue, the achievement of proper political structures, and the achievement of human flourishing. Rituals allow comprehensive common commitments to be made (e.g., through a marriage ceremony) whose impact on the participants only become fully manifest explicitly and concretely over time (e.g., when one marries, one is unlikely

concretely to envisage all the duties involved in being a parent and then a grandparent). The difficulty is that post-traditional humans are largely shorn of many of the ritual behaviors that bind husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and students, communities and individuals, and politics and citizens, as well as creatures to God. Since ritual orients to reality, a weakening of ritual, or a failure of ritual to have its proper compass and character can leave persons disoriented in moral, social, and political reality, as well as in reality generally, so that they become morally, socially, and politically rootless (i.e., they are people of no particular moral commitments, community life, or patriotic concerns), if not lost in the cosmos. Without a coherence of ritual, persons lack a coherent view of the meaning of their lives. They may be unclear as to who should show deference to whom, under what circumstances, and how (e.g., should a wife assert equal authority with her husband, or should “wives be subject to their husbands as to the Lord...[so that] a wife should respect [*phobitae*] her husband” [Ephesians 5:22,33]. Should children insist on being treated as equals with their parents?), so that their relationships are marked by controversy and struggle between competing moral, social, and micro-political understandings. Conflicting views regarding cardinal rituals are expressed in controversies concerning appropriate marriage ceremonies, the proper reverence due on the part of children to parents, and the correct bearing of subjects to sovereigns.

A diminished appreciation of ritual as well as conflicts regarding the appropriate character of rituals (e.g., should children refer to their parents through forms of polite familial address; should they address their parents by the parents’ first names) may lie at the root of the fragility of many contemporary interpersonal relationships and the weakness of contemporary social structures (e.g., the family) intermediate between individuals and the state. The buttressing function of common ritual is largely in disarray. This loss of the coherence of ritually sustained structures may also be the source of a growing anomie in some areas of society: persons increasingly living alone within ever more anonymous, impersonal cultural structures and without an affirming connection with others. Many individuals are no longer nested within and oriented through a web of ceremonial actions that can aid in sustaining a robust experience of mutual commitments and community. The stability of marriage as an institution, of families, communities, and societies in the 21st century will likely depend on the capacity of cultures to maintain communities that support practices that nurture rightly-ordered rituals so as in turn to engage and nurture the presence and experience of mutual commitment and community.

By cultivating a way of life replete with its ordering of values and its understanding of the empirical character of the world, as well as its account of the deep structures of reality, rituals bring people into a common lifeworld and sustain its integrity. Some cardinal rituals have the character of explicitly ceremonial actions binding persons together (e.g., marriage ceremonies). Others, like shaking hands, or even greeting all fellow customers when entering and leaving a restaurant (a ritual still generally observed in parts of Germany)

have less of a salient ceremonial nature but nevertheless bind persons together in social relationships. Through rituals that announce differences in roles and in authority, a complex web of taken-for-granted social expectations is implicitly accepted, acknowledging spheres of intimacy and gulfs of social distance. Such webs of ritually announced expectations and interrelationships support fabrics of social relations and roles around which and through which human interactions can occur with greater harmony and can possess greater endurance. Both explicitly ceremonial rituals and informal conventions, by announcing roles, relations, and expectations, aid in diminishing conflicts by avoiding explicit negotiations regarding the social relations at stake. For example, the informal manners and protocols of a corporation help to sustain its established chains of authority. Even the mere order of shaking hands during introductions concedes a certain community, thereby supporting harmony and mutual collaboration. Rituals supply cultural scaffolding by supporting the moral, social, and political habits, relations, and understandings that moderate points of conflict and encourage community.

Rituals provide cement for human relationships (e.g., the giving of gifts at birthday parties). Rituals support moral commitments by bringing them into action (e.g., a gentleman extending his hand to a lady exiting a taxi). Rituals are like a moral ballet (e.g., a sheriff with his mounted posse riding in the opening parade at a rodeo). Rituals are incarnate lectures about metaphysics, morality, and graceful deportment danced out in the ordinary and extraordinary contexts of life. On the one hand, ritual is ubiquitous: ritual forms a general support for human interaction. On the other hand, ritual behavior must be nurtured to have strength and give moral direction. At the simplest level, rituals must be engaged in order to support sustaining webs of values, mutual respect, and decorum so as to maintain a fabric of civility (e.g., the arrangement and use of cutlery at a meal). Ritual is ingredient to the refinement which the ancients described as the realization and celebration of that which is most truly human: *philanthropia* (Jaeger, 1943–1945). Rituals when fully and rightly engaged nurture the flourishing of the *humanissimus vir* (Haffter, 1983), the sage, the wise man, the *phronemos*, and even the saint (i.e., the behavior of such persons establishes the canons of both rightly- as well as ritely-ordered action). Such persons, in showing the possibility and significance of virtue or holiness, help nurture virtue and enable human flourishing and direct towards the transcendent.

Rituals evoke the feeling of, declare the presence of, lay out the structure of, and maintain the experience of mutual commitment, community, polity, and culture. Core to an adequate philosophical anthropology should be the recognition that ritual activities, ceremonial usages, and forms of etiquette, including genteel manners (Anderson, 1996), are essential to the symbolic framework that supports a culture and its moral life. Mores embedded in ritual give flesh to a culture in that rituals remind the participants of their moral, social, political, religious, and aesthetic ideals, as well as of their mutual commitments and relationships. Because rituals can connect values and sustain commitments to

virtue by rendering incarnate the ideals of human interconnection (e.g., the mutual and differential respect of husbands and wives), rituals can renew and sustain the moral life within a culture. When embedded in a culturally structured appreciation of time and place, rituals emphasize a culture's experience of the rich meaning of seasons (e.g., spring festivals), history (e.g., the ceremonial remembrance of battles won as with San Jacinto Day April 21 [the battle that achieved Texas Independence in 1836]), and feasts (e.g., a meal on Thanksgiving Day), while recognizing certain spaces as holy and revered (e.g., tombs of unknown soldiers that receive a perpetual honor guard), and others as profane (e.g., the injunction to catechumens to spit to the west).

Those who live within moral communities robustly framed by ritual find themselves throughout every day related through ritual behaviors (e.g., morning, noon and evening prayers) to the location of their own projects (e.g., their lives receive a ritually mediated integration and orientation), with those around them (e.g., their relations to others are interpreted and in many cases affirmed), and to reality in general (e.g., through religious rituals). Those who live in thickly ritually-shaped life-worlds are never alone, because rituals bind participants in common action with co-ritualists over time and over space, through history and across distances (e.g., rituals for the remembrance of the dead, such as lighting a candle while praying for one's dead family members). In this case, rituals support the institution of marriage. They sustain the character of families, communities, and cultures over generations. Participants in such webs of ritual experience the thickness and character of mutual commitment, not just the presence of community. Persons embedded in such matrices of ritual tend not to have a feeling of social anomie, though they also tend not to experience a sense of capricious freedom in their social choices. They live in a robustly framed, supported, directed, and defended social contexts.

On the other hand, those not nested in thick sets of ritually-framed expectations that can locate them within highly-determined metaphysical, axiological, and social fabrics of interconnections will to various degrees not experience a thickly orienting envelope of meaning or a set of communal expectations guiding their lives. They seek the seeming freedom of thinner bonds and thinner rituals, preferring to have informal bonds to partners rather than to enter into marriage. The result is a contrast of life-worlds, a conflict of cultures, an incompatibility of rituals for those living outside of a thickly ritualized life when they encounter someone living within a thickly ritual-sustained community (e.g., if a fellow-traveler on a plane crosses himself on take-off and landing, this may seem to those outside of ritual-rich communities to be an improper intrusion into a "neutral" public space). Those who are not immersed in a thick web of mutual commitments and understandings may often experience themselves as disconnected from others (e.g., never receiving Christmas or birthday greetings from friends and relatives), as lacking community, as well as innocent of a sense of the larger purpose and the meaning of things. Such persons may find themselves left without direction, disoriented if not socially isolated, and marked by feelings of anomie. The class of such individuals may be considerable, in that increasingly

residents of large cities, especially in Europe, live alone. Yet, such persons may also experience a sense of freedom, a liberation from restraints, and a strong sense of having fashioned their own self-identity and having personally achieved their individual life projects. They will consider themselves to be self-made men, as having done things their way. In their aloneness, some may relish the stark character of their isolation, the courage of a life lived in the face of apparent ultimate meaninglessness. Others may with time recognize their situation as socially, morally, and metaphysically impoverished.

Because rituals sustain structures of meaning and initiate persons into webs of commitment, an appreciation of ritual is central to understanding better the possibilities in the 21st century of communal engagement versus isolated individual self-determination. Rituals aid in overcoming an individualism born of the Enlightenment assumption that humans can and should think of themselves first and foremost as free and equal persons, as self-legislating agents, able to construct and sustain relationships as well as communities when and where they choose. The persistence of traditional rituals discloses the possibility for maintaining social structures such as traditional families (e.g., families assembling for meals on Christmas, Pascha, and Thanksgiving). The abandonment of rituals discloses the possibility of liberation from constraining communal assumptions and viewpoints (e.g., in the 19th-century the French no longer greeted another as “citizen”, or those after the fall of the Soviet regime abandoning the greeting “comrade”).

The notion that one can freely alter or invent rituals as one pleases allows a place for creativity. However, this view despoils ritual of the opportunity to carry into the present the rich heritage of the past. It takes from ritual the capacity to connect past and future by undermining a sense of enduring commitment and stability. An appreciation of the gulf between the life-world of traditional and post-traditional communities, and between traditional versus post-traditional senses of ritual, requires a recognition of the differences between those thought communities where there is a salience of communal meaning, purpose, and orientation that reaches over generations, versus those where there is, if not a salience of anomie, a sense of disorientation, and loss of meaning, then at least an attenuation of the claims of the past and sense of the priority of the present.

Although traditionalists may embrace radically different rituals and understandings of reality, and may be separated by disagreements as to how those rituals should be structured, they may nevertheless share a communality of commitment to certain human relationships (e.g., marriage as only being between a man and a woman) and to a continuity with the past (e.g., Jews celebrating Passover and Christians celebrating Pascha). While traditionalists may be separated by different understandings of marriage, they may all share a sense of the importance and continuity of the institution of marriage, as between a man and a woman and set within social obligations which bind generations even though marriage means different things to those in different communities. In contrast, post-traditionalists of various sorts may argue in favor of new rituals along with the social bonds they promise to sustain (e.g., endorsing civil rituals for placing couples in registered partnerships in lieu of fully traditional marriage ceremonies

whatever those in a particular culture may be, marriage ceremonies for homosexual couples, etc.). The passion for the post-traditional, against established rituals that bind generations, engenders a passion against the traditional. One might also note the often strident reactions on the part of the post-traditionalists within Roman Catholicism against attempts to restore the more traditional Latin form of their Western liturgy, the Tridentine Mass. In all of this, it is worth underscoring that traditional ritualized relationships bind the present with the past. They possess the benefit of having survived generations of challenges, thus establishing traditional rituals as *prima facie* possessing social and perhaps also biological survival value. An indication of the latter circumstance is the higher birthrate within traditional moral communities (Longman, 2004a, b). The survival strength of particular webs of ritually maintained communal commitments must be better understood. A better appreciation of ritual should offer a more complete account of the social mechanisms likely to maintain the mutual commitments needed to sustain social structures such as families, as well as the communities they constitute and the cultures they support.

### **3.5 Why Rightly-Ordered Worship Is the Cardinal Ritual**

At the origin and core of ritual is the domain of religious ceremony, in particular Divine worship. In different cultures, different points in the human journey from birth through burial and the remembrance of the dead are marked by exorcisms, blessings, and invocations of the Divine. These rituals locate human community and indeed all concerns about the good, the right, and the virtuous within a cosmic context. How these rituals are framed, engaged, and understood depends on one's recognition of the power and nature of the Divine. Indeed, the more one acknowledges the existence of the personal, transcendent Creator God, the more it should become clear that the cardinal act of orientation in the cosmos is Divine worship. Insofar as one recognizes God's existence, and recognizes God as being personal, omnipotent, omniscient, and concerned for His creatures, then to that extent to be rightly oriented in the cosmos and in history is to be rightly related to the personal God in terms of Whom alone one's creaturely status can be adequately appreciated (indeed, the notion of "orientation" derives from Christians facing east in prayer, thus recalling the sun rising early on the morning of Christ's Resurrection). The point is to note the implications of ritual framed within the presence of ultimate personal meaning in contrast with ritual that ignores such meaning. To be confronted with the existence of a personal, omniscient, omnipotent God is to be confronted by a Being in terms of Whom all creation as His creation must be understood and Who merits one's primary personal attention, and to Whom above all else one ought to be rightly and ritely oriented.

It is for this reason that Christians recognize that the ritual of rituals is the Divine Liturgy, the primary corporate act of rational creatures joining in worship of, and thereby orientation to, their Creator and Judge. As the appointed and appropriate interaction between God and man, the Liturgy is

the rightly-directed act of orientation for all theology. It is the core of theology (Engelhardt, 2005; Fagerberg, 2004; Schmemann, 1986). Liturgy is the work of appreciating the relationship of God and man (Engelhardt, 2000, pp. 157–231). In the praxis of rightly-ordered ritual, one moves towards *theoria*, towards experience God's presence. For this reason the Liturgy, along with its *Typikon* (i.e., the ancient rubrics for the ritual), constitutes one of the primary creedal statements of the Orthodox Church.<sup>5</sup> This place of the *Typikon* involves acknowledgement of the importance of the motions and words of incarnate creatures in their relationship to the Divine. Because of the rich significance of the Liturgy, it has been the focus of numerous commentaries, including that of St. Germanus of Constantinople (†733) (Germanus, 1999), and Nicholas Cabasilas (14th century) (Cabasilas, 2002). Moreover, the Liturgy not only instructs and orients, it opens the heart (the *nous*) to a theological knowledge that is empirical, albeit noetic. The ritual of the Divine Liturgy is the cardinal act of orientation in the cosmos, because it rightly orders creatures to their ultimate origin and goal. It brings them to experience their creation and their Redeemer (i.e., God) in a way that provides a foretaste of the eternal heavenly liturgy (Revelations 4–5).

One can express this Christian knowledge regarding ritual in natural-theological terms. Here natural theology is used not in the Schoolman sense born of the Western Middle Ages, but as a reflection on how humans can in general can come to appreciate the cardinal, prayerful relation of creatures to their Creator. What is invoked is a natural liturgical theology. Natural theology in this sense invites an exploration, apart from God's particular entrances into history, of those liturgical-theological relationships that are grounded in the primordial relationship of humans as creatures to their Creator. Such an endeavor in natural liturgical theology can help disclose the cardinal character of religious rites. That is, one can explore the claim that the very character of being a finite, created person requires a religious ritual response because

1. creatures can only be one-sidedly and incompletely understood, even self-understood, apart from their Creator, Who is their defining source;
2. a personal Creator should be recognized by a personal creature through worship because He is their goal and point of orientation (i.e., because He is their completing and final partner, they should seek relationship with Him); and because
3. falsely-directed worship wrongly construes the Creator as well as the creature's relationships to the Creator,
4. the absence of rituals of Divine worship leaves persons to live as if their lives and the universe were without ultimate meanings, thereby

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<sup>5</sup> Core to Christianity from the beginning has been a commitment to right worship. As a result, included among "the credal and dogmatic monuments of the Orthodox Catholic Church [are] the liturgies of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great, complete with their *typikon* or liturgical rubrics and the actual manner of their celebration" (Vasileios, 1984, p. 19). Traditional Christianity is framed by and lives in the rituals integral to right worship.

5. disorienting (i.e., wrongly locating) them in their lives and in the cosmos.
6. As a consequence, rightly engaging in religious ritual sets the context for rightly ordering all other rituals, and thus for being rightly oriented in the cosmos.
7. Further, a rightly-ordered appreciation of the holy rightly orients the worshiper's appreciation of the good, the right, and the virtuous, because without a God's-eye perspective, views of human flourishing and of proper action become in principle intractably plural,
8. Because humans are bodily beings, the ritual relation to God will involve bodily actions that symbolically express their appropriate relationship to God.

It is because of the necessity of creatures being rightly related to their Creator in order to be rightly related to their ultimate original and final goal that rituals of worship crucially ground and orient all other rituals.

It is surely the case that one can make some sense of some things without making ultimate sense of everything: we have both regional and ultimate concerns with meaning. The theological point with respect to God and ritual is that, if God exists and if He has the properties recognized by Orthodox Christians, then any understanding of rituals will to some extent be off the mark if one does not take into account the existence of this God Who is one's ultimate point of orientation. In the background is an extension of an insight articulated by Kant, namely, that, without an at least as-if acknowledgement of God's existence, commitments even to morality cannot claim categorical priority over the claims of prudential rationality (Engelhardt 2010a, Engelhardt 2010b). This circumstance has implications as well for our understanding of the nature and character of ritual, especially its significance in renewing and sustaining culture and the moral life. Without an unconditioned point of objective moral and metaphysical reference, all accounts become one among many other socio-historically-conditioned perspectives. Without a point of objectivity that is not simply intersubjectivity but is rightly anchored in being, there is no ultimate narrative of the universe, since there is no ultimate narrator. The consequences are far-reaching. To paraphrase Gianni Vattimo: once one acts as if God did not exist, then all facts become cultural interpretations (i.e., man becomes the measure of all things), with the result that one has engendered a principled plurality of alternative narratives, each with its own hermeneutics sustaining a plurality of competing ritual systems, among which one cannot meaningfully say that one can canonically identify the *right* one.

The contrast between those frameworks of ritual that are located within a recognition of a personal Creator-God and those framed as if all were ultimately meaningless is profound. The latter framing hermeneutic need not actually deny a final point of cosmic orientation. It is enough implicitly to turn Immanuel Kant's postulate of practical reason on its head, and to proceed to integrate morality and all cardinal human rituals as would a religious agnostic: without any reference to, but no denial of, an ultimate point of meaning and therefore of unconditional truth. Even religious and



philosophical accounts that assert that beyond humans there is an ultimate meaning, but do not recognize it as personal, are partially disorienting in holding that at the core of the meaning of the universe is a meaning that is less than the self-conscious existence of humans. The recognition of the inadequacy of an ultimate meaning that is less than personal involves a special appreciation of the principle of sufficient reason. The existence of ultimate personal meaning, a personal God, places at the core of all existence not an anonymous force, but a creative self-defining self-consciousness, so that truth is appreciated most fully as a Who, not just a what, a Being Who can fully name Himself “I am Who am” (“I will be Who I will be” – Exodus 3:14). The assertion of impersonal meaning, as the ultimate meaning of a cosmos that contains self-conscious persons, is radically inadequate. Only meaning that can fully self-consciously appreciate its own meaning, and the meaning of every story, can be ultimate meaning.

For example, without religious rituals that recognize a definitive relationship to a transcendent, personal God, all other rituals become merely human contrivances and conventions in (1) not being set within the cosmic or ultimate context that Self-consciously defines Itself and all else. Rituals are (2) left with affirming a particular system of rituals as sustained by and within a particular tradition, but not by reality, much less a defining, self-conscious, ultimate point of reference. In particular, without rightly-ordered rituals of ultimate orientation, persons are related to their particular spheres of reality as if all were ultimately contingent, as if there were no non-humanly constituted point of final reference. In the absence of religious rituals aimed at unconditional transcendence, rituals are undertaken as if all were in the end ultimately purposeless: as if all ultimately came from nowhere and went nowhere. The point is not simply epistemological. Not recognizing God’s existence is not just an intellectual mistake. It involves a willful decision about how one will define one’s relationship to reality. In such circumstances, post-modernity triumphs: all accounts of morality, ritual, and meaning become regarded as fabrics of particular traditions, particular narratives constituted out of a particular and contingent human response to the human condition carrying with them only their own particular hermeneutics.

Here it may seem that one has found a defining cleft between the Confucian cultural sphere and that of Christianity. Confucian culture often takes itself only obscurely and unclearly to recognize the Divine as a transcendent, personal God. What the Divine means for Confucian culture is far from unambiguous (Ching, 1977; Fung, 1983; Ivanhoe, 2007; Legge, 1971; Loudon, 2002). Though it is clear that Christian culture recognizes the personal presence of the God Who commands, both cultures have rituals that direct humans in aiming rightly towards the Divine. One might consider the twice-yearly border sacrifice (at the southern border at the winter solstice and at the northern border at the summer solstice) by the Emperor of China to ShangDi, the Supreme God, which sacrifices were offered from 2230 B.C. to A.D. 1911. The text (from A.D. 1538) addresses God as personal and sovereign.

Of old in the beginning, there was the great chaos, without form and dark. The five elements [planets] had not begun to revolve, nor the sun and the moon to shine. In the midst thereof there existed neither forms or sound. Thou, O spiritual Sovereign, camest forth in Thy presidency, and first didst divide the grosser parts from the purer. Thou madest heaven; Thou madest earth; Thou madest man. All things with their reproductive power got their being. . . . Thou hast vouchsafed, O Di, to hear us, for Thou regardest us as a Father. I, Thy child, dull and unenlightened, am unable to show forth my dutiful feelings. . . . Thy sovereign goodness is infinite. As a potter, Thou hast made all living things. Thy sovereign goodness is infinite. Great and small are sheltered [by Thee]. As engraven on the heart of Thy poor servant is the sense of Thy goodness, so that my feeling cannot be fully displayed. With great kindness Thou dost bear us, and not withstanding our shortcomings, dost grant us life and prosperity (Damascene, 2004, p. 5, 6).

This ritual (1) recognizes the power of God in shaping, if not creating, reality, (2) acknowledges God as personal (i.e., as a Father) and as able to hear the Emperor's prayer (i.e., this Deity is not the detached God of the deists), and (3) appreciates God as responsive to prayer, as able to bestow life and prosperity. The prayer is a pleading to the Sovereign of the universe for conditions of harmony within which relationships between earthly sovereigns and subjects, husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and students can be both rightly as well as ritely realized and maintained.

In this ritual, the emperor clearly oriented himself and the Chinese empire to a personal God. Take, for example, the ceremonial prayer used by Emperor Jia Jing (reigned A.D. 1522–1566).

O awesome Creator, I look up to You. How imperial is the expansive heavens. Now is the time when the masculine energies of nature begin to be displayed, and with the great ceremonies I reverently honor You. Your servant, I am but a reed or willow; my heart is but as that of an ant; yet have I received Your favoring Mandate, appointing me to the government of the empire. I deeply cherish a sense of my ignorance and foolishness, and am afraid lest I prove unworthy of Your abundant grace. Therefore will I observe all the rules and statues, striving, insignificant as I am, to be faithful. Far distant here, I look up to Your heavenly palace. Come in Your precious chariot to the altar. Your servant, I bow my head to the earth, reverently expecting Your abundant grace. All my officers are here arranged along with me, dancing and worshipping before You. All the spirits accompany You as guards, from the east to the west. Your servant, I prostrate myself to meet You, and reverently look up for Your coming, O Di. O that You would promise to accept our offerings, and regard us, while we worship You because Your goodness is inexhaustible! (quoted in Chan, 2006, p. 138)

The character of this and other prayers by the emperor makes it quite clear that the emperor is directing himself to an all-powerful, personal God. The context for all other rituals is shaped by this ritual and its analogues, which rituals place all human activities within the ambit of Divine power.

In summary, religious rituals directed to the personal God affirm that there is a truth, a canonical narrative, however poorly and incompletely this may be appreciated. Accounts that decouple ritual from a notion that ritual should be rightly ordered and directed to a point of ultimate meaning offer only numerous alternative frameworks or traditions within which the complexity of different ritual

systems is embedded and relativized. Each ritual system becomes one among alternative other ritual systems. In such circumstances, the conflict between traditional and post-traditional frameworks is reduced to a conflict between alternative human narratives, accounts, and/or hermeneutics of meaning, which may be more or less rich and integrative of the complexity of the human experience, and which may sustain more or less elegant, beautiful, and integrated systems of rituals, but which cannot be judged as right or wrong, that is, as rightly or ritely directed in any ultimate or final sense. Instead, one is left within the horizon of the finite and the immanent, such that all facts are in the end only interpretations rightly ordered and directed. Religious rituals not only disclose, if not open up an otherwise unappreciated depth of meaning, but religious rituals highlight a profound gulf separating foundationally different appreciations of the human condition: they disclose a profound depth to the contrast between traditional versus post-traditional appreciations of the human condition.

### **3.6 Cultural Preservation and Renewal: The Culture Wars as Ritual Wars**

The English term culture is derived from the Latin *cultura*, which compasses cultivation of the soil as well as the performance of rites of worship. The root of *cultura* is in the verb *culo*, which can mean to till the soil, to cultivate a field, to dwell in a place, to honor a shrine, to care for something, to dress, to adorn, to give honor, to devote oneself, and to worship. Culture is also tied to *cultus*, which spans labor, education, refinement, style of dress, adoration, and worship. To have a culture is to have the fruit of an encompassing way of cultivating human life, as well as a relation with the Divine. From social refinement to the worship of God, the fabric of culture is shaped by the rituals that till the landscape of human possibility. Since ritualized actions can sum up thick webs of meaning and commitment, attention to ritual is core to sustaining, renewing, and changing a culture. Here praxis sets the context for theory, in that ritual practice defines and directs a culture (though, of course, the same can be said in a different way but reciprocally on behalf of theory). Because rituals engage cardinal summarizing webs of meaning and commitment that frame a culture's intersubjective space, recasting rituals will, helpfully or harmfully, recast a culture (e.g., the presence or absence of habitual linguistic phrases such as "thank God" or "God willing" marks the religious or secular nature of a culture's public discourse). Such changes in ritual may even be more effective than directly correcting and reforming false theoretical accounts, though surely both are important tasks.

Because of the centrality of ritual in human life, renewing a culture requires restoring or augmenting those rituals which support particular, rightly-directed webs of meanings and commitments, which among other things structure the life of virtue. As already indicated, rightly-ordered rituals nourish the habits that form the virtues. In this regard, rightly-ordered rituals that bind parents and children, husbands and wives, communities and their members, and creatures to God, are

crucial to the habits of the moral life. What should count as “rightly ordered” rituals can in part be determined by reference to the virtues they sustain. How one identifies the content to be affirmed for the virtues will depend on whether one is a traditionalist or a post-traditionalist, and of what sort. Much also depends on whether the character of a ritual as rightly-ordered has an ultimate foundation or is simply determined by human moral and aesthetic creativity and artifice. As already noted, questions of which rituals are rightly or wrongly oriented involve matters that fuel the culture wars. These conflicts are in part controversies about alternative rituals (e.g., patterns of interaction that indicate the proper deference of wives to their husbands, or instead an equality of authority between spouses; the deference of adult children to their parents, or instead equality between parents and children; the deference of creatures to their Creator, or instead a view that takes humans to be the final arbiters of meaning). Rituals are also about competing ways of life. Competing sets of rituals affirm alternative scaffoldings for incompatible webs of meaning and commitments at the foundations of central human relationships. This diversity of ritual supports different ways of structuring key human practices, from marriage and parenthood to friendship, citizenship, and relation to the cosmos (e.g., worship). Alternative webs of ritual sustain alternative cultures. At issue are conflicting visions of human flourishing, as well as of the meaning of life and the significance of the cosmos.

These conflicts of culture are aggravated by competing and incompatible moral and political views, but most especially by conflicting views about religion, religious rituals, and the transcendent. Religion is key because religious rituals through their metaphysical embeddedness provide ultimate orientation and therefore a foundational framework for all actions, all other rituals, and all social relations. At stake are not just the differences separating the various religions. There is the even more profound gulf separating traditional religious understandings from the secular, laicist, post-Christian, indeed post-religious cultures that embrace as well post-traditional mainline churches and post-Confucian Chinese culture, which gulf widened dramatically in the wake of the consequences of the French Revolution. Cultures that attempt to exclude religious rituals from their public space (or radically secularize religious rituals, as when Christmas celebrations become associated not with the birth of the Messiah, but with Santa Claus, snowmen, and reindeer) foundationally differ from those framed around and through rituals and celebrations that acknowledge religious truth (e.g., the observance of the Advent Fast prior to the celebration of Christmas so as, *inter alia*, to recognize the proper yearning that all should have for the Messiah’s coming). As noted, those who attempt to frame their culture without the support of religious ritual implicitly approach reality and the significance of all rituals as if all ultimately came from nowhere, went to nowhere, and for no ultimate purpose. Those whose lives are framed by substantive religious rituals approach reality and the significance of ritual with the recognition that all meaning is not ultimately transient and socio-historically conditioned, appreciated an enduring meaning to all human actions and rituals.

Across the gulf separating those who acknowledge ultimate meaning and those who do not, the partisans of these contrasting views will recognize each other as moral strangers, indeed as reciprocally deeply morally strange. One might think of the astonishment of secular persons on seeing a family saying grace in a restaurant, or of religious persons at the vacuity, indeed perverse character, of secular funeral services. They confront each other separated by a profound cultural gulf defined by incompatible accounts of the universe and the significance of the human condition. It is this gulf that characterizes one of the foundational points of cultural conflict at the beginning of the 21st century. It is a conflict between an acknowledgement of ultimate meaning as found in the personal God, and an acquiescence in, if not a commitment to an at least as-if ultimate meaninglessness, the final transience of all self-conscious meaning. As Benedict XVI, pope of Rome, observes with regard to the secular, laicist culture of the West that developed out of the French Revolution, and that characterizes much of Continental Western Europe, “To the other cultures of the world, there is something deeply alien about the absolute secularism that is developing in the West. They are convinced that a world without God has no future” (Benedict, 2006, pp. 21–22). These two foundationally different worldviews and the rituals that frame them are in profound tension, indeed they are in conflict.

### 3.7 Taking Ritual Seriously

For China and the world generally, it is a matter of no mean importance to assess the role of religious rituals in setting the context for all other rituals, as well as for a culture’s openness to enduring meaning. These matters are matters of substantive contention and enduring importance. Because the renewal of culture is tied to the renewal and/or the development of religious ritual, which in turn involves distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate, orthodox and heterodox religious rituals, the very talk of such renewal is provocative, controversial, and divisive. Nevertheless, such difference, controversy, division, and conflict are unavoidable. To aim at virtue is to identify vice. To affirm some rituals and to reject others is often to accept or reject whole ways of life. Such judgments about whole ways of life are inevitable if one is to aim at moral and religious truth, in that the significance of moral truth is embedded in the acknowledgement or rejection of a point of ultimate personal significance.

There is a temptation to obscure the depth of these disagreements and the disputes they engender. One strategy is to attempt to frame the disagreements as if they involved only choices among alternative human narratives, rather than disagreements about which narrative it is into which Ultimate Meaning tells the universe. Separated from an ultimate perspective, moral and metaphysical claims are construed as mere alternative interpretations. They are no longer recognized as disputes about the Truth, about matters bearing on the appreciation of ultimate meaning. This obscuring of an ultimate perspective occurs most especially if one renders the encounter with the transcendent God into “a

religion in keeping with reason”, because the reason invoked will always be inadequate to the transcendent and hostage to the particular philosophical conceits of the age (Ratzinger, 2006, p. 47). In such circumstances, the experience of God, and the rituals that reflect that experience, are brought into conformity with a particular human perspective, a particular rational or philosophical account. In such cases, religion and its rituals are brought to the bar of human judgment.

Matters are quite different if one recognizes a truly transcendent point of ultimate orientation. In such a case, human reason, ritual, and the proper nature of religion are appreciated as needing to be brought into accord with an encounter with the fully transcendent God, the Person Who commands, Who places all in relationship to Him, and to Whom one turns primarily through worship, so that such rituals take on the character of mysteries, of ways of encountering the Ultimate. An encounter with ultimate personal Truth sets the praxes of ritual prior to the claims of theory. As a consequence, the concern to have matters rightly and ritely ordered becomes an issue of ultimate concern. The result is that disputes about ultimate truth and the meaning of reality are foundational to the most bitter of the battles of the culture wars. Choices among rituals and the meanings of rituals in the end turn on fundamentally different understandings of morality, social reality, the meaning of ultimate Truth, and the significance of reality. As noted at the beginning of this essay, ritual divides while it also renews. The issue of how, to what purpose, and with reference to whom to renew our culture profoundly separates the parties at disagreement. We do not agree about the final significance of things or about how to relate to reality. The culture wars are wars about ritual.

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