

RITUALS ONLINE: DYNAMIC PROCESSES REFLECTING INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

by

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Within the field of the new media, the Internet is recognised by a growing number of researchers both as source and tool for examining and analysing religions and religious activities. Today a wide range of religious rituals is crossing the border from the offline to the online realm. On personal homepages as well as on institutional websites (e.g. churches) one can find classical ritual texts, different descriptions of rituals and a lot of ritual prescripts, which together inform or guide the user in ritual behaviour. It becomes evident that by the change of media the rituals as well as the religions as a whole undergo certain processes of change, adaptation and innovation.

On webpages containing Rituals Online, a wide range of highly complex transfer and design processes take place which affect the planning and accomplishment of religiousness and religious performance on the Internet. Besides tracing the different patterns and structures of these processes, one also has to think about the new theoretical and methodological challenges the researchers in Religious and Ritual Studies are confronted with since the Internet offers a new and nearly boundless field and space for academic study

THE CONCEPT OF “RITUAL DYNAMICS” [1]

For the academic discipline “Religious Studies” which is nowadays mostly culture orientated, the wide field of rituals presents a challenging subject of investigation.

That is especially the case since the propositions of classical Ritual Theory¹ are being challenged more and more and consequently new theoretical

¹ Concerning the problem of defining the term ritual see: Snoek, J. (2003). *Defining ‘Rituals’*. In: J. Kreinath, J. Snoek & M. Stausberg (eds), *Theorizing Rituals*. Vol.-I: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts (Numen-Bookseries 114-1), Leiden & Boston: Brill 3-14.

concepts arise. A brief survey of the history of the term „ritual“ and of the development of theoretical concepts concerning rituals shows a wide and diversifying field of different approaches and sentiments. The first theorists of ritual like James Frazer, Arnold van Gennep or Emile Durckheim² tried to verify the term ritual on the basis of functional or essential content. Their approaches have influenced the scientific reflection about this topic for a long time. Looking for the “pure” core of a ritual or intertwining the society with ritual behaviour set the basic elements for numerous trials to obtain a proper definition of the term ritual. A modern understanding in ritual theory was not established until the so called *cultural turn* in humanities in the early 1970s.

Later theorists like Mary Douglas, Stanley Tambiah or Clifford Geertz³ among others have underlined the communicative or performative aspects of rituals. The central terms shaped by these scholars emphasized certain aspects of interaction and ritual behaviour which allowed a sophistication of levels and patterns of theoretical description. Most of these more recent concepts were developed by newly evaluating the established theoretic assumptions.

This is the case for the concept which will be briefly discussed below. One of the most current scientific approaches in the field of ritual is the concept *Ritual Dynamics* which was shaped by the Collaborative Research Centre 619⁴ at the University of Heidelberg/Germany. By systematically challenging characteristics which were used again and again in former approaches of defining ritual – for example that rituals are unchangeable, have a defined form, consist of formalized sequences of action, are based on community – the concept of *Ritual Dynamics* was developed.

New scientific results reveal that rituals show dynamic structures which up to now were mostly underestimated. These dynamics manifest themselves in various processes concerning all dimensions of a ritual, e. g. the

² Frazer, J. G. (1890), *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*. London. Gennep, A. van (1981) (1. Ed. 1908). *Les rites de passage. Étude systématique des rites*. Paris. Durkheim, É. (1912). *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse; Le système totémique en Australie*, Paris.

³ Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London. Tambiah, S. (1979). *A Performative Approach to Ritual*. Proceedings of the British Academy, 65, 113-169. Geertz, C. (1987). *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*. Frankfurt a.M.

⁴ Collaborative Research Centre 619 „Dynamics of Ritual“. Retrieved November 15, 2006 from <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/>.

participant(s), the setting, the time, the performance, the involved objects (ceremonial cloth or artefacts) or the ritual text corpus. Among other things diverse forms of transfer⁵ processes can be identified which affect the constitution or performance of rituals. These processes of transfer become evident if the context of a ritual changes meaning, the ritual is transferred to a new context or the context surrounding the ritual is transferred.⁶ This happens, for example, in the case of migration, political change or if the ritual is transferred to a new media.

There are also processes of adaptations where elements taken from a foreign cultural or religious tradition are integrated in ritual structures which already exist. Furthermore processes of invention can be observed where parts of rituals or even complex ritual structures are completely created from scratch. From an emic point of view these inventions are often presented as reinventions by relating the ritual to a former and reputedly authentic tradition. The various processes described above are also part of the concept *Ritual Design*⁷ which stresses in a theoretical way the creative aspects of the concept *Ritual Dynamics*. It can be presumed that rituals consist of certain patchwork structures constructed in conscious or unconscious processes which are composed of adaptations, innovations or individual combinations of different elements. Therefore it is possible that rituals are indeed designed, modulated or adapted according to the own religious or ritual needs.

The creators draw the required ritual elements from a wide and complex pool – the so called *cluster*⁸ – of religious and ritual supply which is connected by various discursive processes of negotiation within this framework.

In summary, the analysis of case studies from diverse cultural and temporal contexts reveal that the traditional perceptions of rituals as static, re-

⁵ Snoek, J./ Lüddeckens, D. / Radde-Antweiler, K./ Langer, R. (2006). "Transfer of Ritual". *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20.1, 1- 10.

⁶ Ibid, p. 1.

⁷ Radde-Antweiler, K. (2006). *Rituals-Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals. Online - Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet*. (1/2). Special Issue on Rituals on the Internet, 54-72.

See also: Radde-Antweiler, K. *Ritualdesign im Medium Internet. Rezeption und Invention von Ritualtraditionen bei sogenannten magischen Ritualen der Wicca-Bewegung*, PhD Thesis (forthcoming).

⁸ For the application of the term *cluster* in Religious Studies see: Meier, G. (2006). Religion meets Internet. Plädoyer für einen differenzierten Umgang mit einem neuen Forschungsfeld. In: *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 23/2, p.277-284.

petitive and stereotyped in behaviour do not apply in a vast majority of cases. In contrast, the results show that rituals are very complex and have particularly dynamic structures with a highly creative potential which therefore need to be analysed applying new theoretical and methodological tools.

RITUALS ON THE INTERNET [2]

The dynamic structures within rituals can be observed and analysed in the Internet in an excellent way.

Since the rapid diffusion of this new media, beginning roughly in 1995/96, the researchers of Religious Studies have been confronted with an expeditiously growing number of religious and ritual sources on the Internet. Various religious traditions are being presented on homepages, religious and ritualistic topics are discussed in chats or newsgroups, even in online games rituals such as weddings take place. Like in any other socially embedded media the Internet, too, is a place where various aspects of religiousness and rituals are discussed and negotiated.⁹

But at this point it is important to recognise that beside religious groups and organisations it is above all a nearly unmanageable number of individuals who are present in this media, some with their own webpages, some as participants in internet-based communication structures like forums or chats. This offers a wide and excellent field of investigation for the researcher of Religious Studies which has been widely ignored and neglected by the scientific community up to now. Therefore the main focus of analysis below will be on rituals.

According to the distinction of *Religion Online* and *Online Religion*, based on an approach from the Canadian sociologist Christopher Helland,¹⁰ the

⁹ Cancik, H. / Gladigow, B. (1988). *Gegenstände und wissenschaftlicher Kontext von Religionswissenschaft*. In: H. Cancik, B. Gladigow, M. Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe I*, 26-40.

¹⁰ Helland, Ch. (2000). *Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas*. In: Jeffrey K. Hadden/Douglas E. Cowan (Ed.), *Religion on the Internet. Research Prospects and Promises* (Religion and the Social Order 8), Amsterdam et al., 205-223. Helland, Ch. (2005). *Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet*. In: *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, 2005, 1-16, <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5823>.

The distinction of the terms information zone (=Religion Online) and interactivity zone (=Online-Religion) introduced by Helland in 2000, is not valid any more today due to the latest development of the Internet which dissolves the boundaries of both zones. The direct connection of information, communication and interaction marked the initial point for the so called Web2.0.

terms *Ritual Online* and *Online-Ritual* can be defined in analogy. They can be used as heuristic working categories. *Ritual Online* often indicates ritual texts, ritual prescripts or descriptions of rituals which are provided online, but the performance of the rituals is conducted offline. One example are prayer texts which are provided online by religious organisations e.g. the Christian Church on the one hand and on the other hand by numerous individuals. Therefore these texts can be read nearly arbitrarily. On the other hand, the expression *Online-Ritual* represents rituals whose complete performance takes place in cyberspace. In numerous *Online-Rituals* it is possible to accomplish the ritual by using the mouse pointer.¹¹ In 3D environments one can alternatively make use of an „avatar“ as virtual agent of the real person to perform a ritual.¹² Evidently both heuristic categories are highly idealized. In many cases the boundaries are being blurred, for example if one part of the ritual is performed online whereas the other part has to be conducted in front of the screen in the offline area due to the need for real candles, real food, etc. Furthermore it has to be taken into account that even in an *Online-Ritual* when using a virtual avatar there is the real body of the participant separated from the ritual virtual space but who is involved in the ritual action at the same time by providing the agency for the ritual. These complex relations between the online and the offline context have to be taken into consideration when analysing *Rituals Online* and *Online-Rituals*.

Both types of ritual categories from various religious traditions can be found on the Internet, but due to the technical conditions *Online-Rituals* are a growing but still less popular phenomenon. With the rapid change of technology this situation is expected to change soon.

AN INDIVIDUAL PRAYER AS ONE EXAMPLE OF RITUALS ONLINE [3]

In the following an example of a *Ritual Online* will be presented.¹³ On the personal homepage „Lichtengel“¹⁴ (Angel of Light) which focuses on angels

¹¹ For example the virtual vestry of a German church in Frankfurt.
<http://www.frankfurtevang.lich.de/>.

¹² For example the Virtual 3 D World „Secondlife“. <http://www.secondlife.com>.

¹³ This Homepage derives from the PhD project of the author (<http://www.rituals-online.uni-hd.de/>) which mainly deals with homepage in German language. The used text was therefore translated by Katharina Wilkens.

¹⁴ Retrieved November 15, 2006 from <http://www.lichtengel.de> .

we can find the following text of a prayer with the title „Erkenntnis“ (awareness)¹⁵

“I choose live and
Lie down in your divine bosom.
I beg for the grace
To see the union of the sun and the moon
And to overcome the separation of my spirit.
I beg for the grace
To transform the fear in my heart.
I melt into the higher truth
Until I am perfectly clear and peaceful.
Let me become the torch on the path of the One.
God, my yearning for YOU is great!!
Embrace me with YOUR breath,
Bless me in YOUR light.
Flush my whole being,
My spirit, my consciousness and my body
With the golden light of forgiveness
And the silver light of enlightenment.”¹⁶

Subsequently the author of the webpage provides the information that the text was created in January 2004 and was inspired from various sources.¹⁷

Prayers are one form of ritual texts and in general seen as very personal expressions of the own faith. Besides traditional prayers which often find their way into liturgical forms in the regions of Western Christianity, we can observe a high number of very individual prayers which are created and used by a single person depending on their recent situation. Due to the fact

¹⁵ Retrieved November 15, 2006 from <http://www.lichtengel.de/Gebet2.htm>.

¹⁶ „Ich entscheide mich für das Leben und lege mich in deinen göttlichen Schoß. Ich bitte um die Gnade, Sonne und Mond als Einheit zu schauen und die Trennung meines Geistes zu überwinden. Ich bitte um die Gnade, die Angst in meinem Herzen zu transformieren. Ich verschmelze mit der höchsten Wahrheit, bis ich vollkommen klar und in Frieden bin. Lass mich zur Fackel werden auf dem Weg des Einen. Gott, meine Sehnsucht nach DIR ist groß !! Umschließe mich mit DEINEM Atem, segne mich in DEINEM Licht. Durchflute mein ganzes Sein, meinen Geist, mein Bewusstsein und meinen Körper mit dem goldenen Licht der Vergebung und dem silbernen Licht der Erleuchtung.“

¹⁷ “(inspiriert aus verschiedenen Quellen - Januar 2004)“, retrieved November 15, 2006 from <http://www.lichtengel.de/Gebet2.htm>.

that until now these prayers are usually spoken and performed in private without written record it was only possible to analyse those prayers which derived from a theological upper-class discourse or which were published by a group of privileged authors. For Scholars of Religious Studies this situation changed fundamentally with the establishment of the Internet.

Thus the Internet as a media where people (mostly from First World Countries) are increasingly becoming able to participate actively is consequently also a place where transient personal prayer texts are published and therefore become visible for the researchers for the first time. When analysing these texts one can find distinct patterns of conscious or unconscious patchworking. In addition to the use of terms derived from the ecclesiastic Christian tradition like "grace" or the words describing the light and the breath of God there are also many notions deriving clearly from other religious traditions. The expression "melt into the higher truth" might be derived from a mystic tradition whereas the word "enlightenment" points toward Buddhism. The appeal for silver and golden light might be borrowed from the energetic Light-Worker Movement which applies multicoloured light for healing. A ritual text like this can be seen as a mirror reflecting the different negotiation processes in which the individual is involved within the framework of – in this example – the Christian, Buddhist, mystic etc. cluster. From this a religious identity involving the field of rituals is constantly constructed by the individuals using the available elements which fit into their recent personal situation. In most cases the authors of individual prayers like the one quoted above do not identify or name the different religious sources explicitly. This indicates that from an emic point of view, there are less problems of coherence. On the contrary, it seems rather a regular case to use elements from diverse religious and ritual traditions which from an emic perspective do not affect the efficacy of a ritual.

RITUALITY, RELIGIOUSNESS AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF INDIVIDUALS [4]

The results¹⁸ delineated from the field *Rituals Online* make it possible to draw some conclusions on a more theoretical level. By applying the con-

¹⁸ For recent research and publications see the project "Between Online-Religion and Religion-Online Constellations of Ritual Transfers within the Medium Internet". Retrieved November 16, 2006 from <http://www.rituals-online.de/>.

cepts of *Ritual Transfer* and *Ritual Design* as possible points of analysis, *Rituals Online* clearly show the dynamic structures and developments of rituals in general. For the coverage and the analysis of the entire field it can be very instructive to also consider the perspective of individuals. The change of perspectives – from upper-class discourses to individual perceptions – with its associated implications and consequences can be conceptually described with the term *Individual Ritality*.¹⁹

Therefore it is not sufficient to merely describe an emic perspective. This would only amount to an atomised case study which would be informative with regard to certain research questions but which seems to be only contingently of interest in terms of the elaboration of a general theory of rituals. This means that the emic perspective has to be analysed from a scientific point of view particularly with regard to certain patterns of the development of ritual structures which were presumed in these texts. The results of the analysis have to be embedded into social, political, cultural and scientific discourses they derive from. The interdependence of various perspectives and discursive levels demands new impulses for the further building of ritual theory. On the basis of first results from recent projects it can be expected that nearly all classical categories and schemes of interpretation have to be re-evaluated or even replaced by new non-systemic approaches.

The basis for the approach *Individual Ritality* is a recent discussion at the Heidelberg Institute of Religious Studies where the concept *Individual Religiousness* is developed within an interdisciplinary scenario. A fundamental change of perspectives is one of the key concepts. By taking individual religious constellations into account, the diversity of the field of religions becomes evident. The dynamic processes which occur due the interdependencies between the different perspectives can also be recognized in this scenario.

One consequence of the turn of perspectives becomes clear with the fact that nearly all of the systemic categories for the description and analysis of religious traditions do not fit any more. So it not only seems to be necessary but demanded to think about new terms of description which are able to cope with the dynamic and fluctuating patterns occurring in a history of religions which also includes individuals as an important factor.

¹⁹ Together with Simone Heidbrink the author is currently preparing a publication concerning the presentation of this concept