

I

Diskurs

2 Comments

Rituals are not always costly

Foreword | The article is highly interesting as it provides a new angle on rituals in the course of evolution. The role of rituals is seen with regard to their function of enhancing cooperation. However not all rituals work in this way. Not all rituals serve a particular social function and not all are costly. In Catholicism rituals play a much greater role than in Protestantism.

On [1] | Cooperation is certainly a very important human trait and one which distinguishes humans from the animal kingdom. However it seems to me an exaggeration to emphasize this particular social skill at the expense of others such as rationality. Animals are certainly not rational. Further social insects are extremely cooperative but are certainly not human.

On [1.1] | It seems to me a little too idealistic to say that only in the animal kingdom – especially with regard to chimpanzees – we find “follow-the-leader” and “self-interest” strategies as unique traits which distinguishes animals from humans. Everyday experience shows that this kind of atavistic “cooperation” is also found in human behaviour. The idea of commitment and permission to disengage as a means of ruling out self-interest for the sake of cooperation seems to me very important. Again the question is what makes humans act in a way that really is cooperative. Again we of course see that in everyday life that human beings cancel their commitments without asking for permission.

The author points to the very important connection between cooperation and justice as a means for eradicating the habit of monopolizing rewards. This merits comment from the perspective of OT studies. The idea of justice was applied already very early in the history of religion with the notion of God as the one who guarantees justice for human beings who acted in an appropriate (cooperative) way. For this kind of theological reasoning acting in an appropriate way should result in well-being and in a way of living which mirrors God’s blessings and which avoids suffering. However what happens when people suffer without having acted in an ethically questionable way? This is the question raised by the story of Job.

On [1.2] | Role differentiation is an important step towards fostering cooperation. It is obviously connected with the “symbolic revolution”, because it is expressed in various forms (as the author describes and elaborates in the subsequent chapter).

On [2] | In addition to looking at rituals, one also could argue that the physiological basis of adopting cooperative behaviour lies in the emergence of mirror neurons. Commitment to a group, however, and the power of the group to enforce this commitment through rituals is ambivalent because it preserves the status quo of the group. There is thus the question of the way in which innovations that need to change rituals and group behaviour can be realized. For example one can ask the question how can it be explained that the rule “eye by eye” (Exodus 21: 23-25) was effectively introduced in social law as a substitute for atavistic blood vengeance. To introduce new rituals, they have to substitute old ones. How can this be explained if rituals exert such a compelling influence on humans towards social conformity? Thus, with regard to evolutionary progress, rituals are obviously ambivalent if they just work to maintain social homeostasis by commitment.

Besides, not all rituals have a social function. For example, sacrifices to the Gods are not necessarily social. For this reason they were criticised by the Old Testament prophets who demanded social justice (Hebrew: *z’daqia*) instead of sacrifices. Again the question arises: How can these changes in ritual behaviour be explained from a naturalistic evolutionary perspective? Rituals – in particular sacrifices – can become highly ineffective and non-adaptive from an evolutionary point of view when they wind up in the dead end of pure formalism. For example, sacrifices in the old Maltese religion ruined the environment almost completely such that the early inhabitants of Malta ran the risk of becoming extinct.

On [3] | I agree that formalization, repetition and goal demolition are important aspects of a ritual. I would add that rituals are based anthropologically either in a kind of genetic predisposition (if related to basic appetites) or are culturally determined.

On [3.1] | The connection between ritual and value seem to me unnecessary because rituals tend to become empty and attract hypocrites; a fact about which religious leaders and renovators often complain. For example, the Pharisees practiced an empty and ritualized religion. It is not by chance that Pharisees have become the symbol of hypocrisy. This is basically the general problem of religions which are based on the observation of laws: no one can guarantee that the believers really act from the centre of their personhood when they obey religious laws. This also applies, of course, to costly signals. I want to pose three questions with regard to rituals:

- i. Not all rituals are social. For example morning and evening prayers in solitude are, by definition, certainly not social. How is this compatible with the costly-signal theory of rituals?
- ii. Not all rituals are costly signals. For example praying – alone or in community – is certainly not costly. How is it compatible with the costly-signal theory of rituals?
- iii. There are rituals in criminal circles which are socially destructive. How is this compatible with the costly-signal theory of rituals?

On [3.2] | The social transmission of rituals by imitation and gesture is ambivalent. They can lead to social exclusion (good guys, bad guys).

On [4] | The costly signal theory for explaining social coherence and the trustworthiness of commitment depends on a kind of cost-benefit analysis by a member of a group. This utilitarian point of view is of course quite convincing. But there may also other factors such social pressure which might exceed the individualistic utilitarian considerations of a potential faker. This view is also based on the assumption that human beings are basically egoistic and that social commitment thus needs to be enforced by means that appeal to this egocentricity through costly signals. Altruism of course then needs to be explained by kin selection or reciprocal altruism. However, what of the thought that not all human beings are naturally egoists? Instead of thinking in terms of strict egocentricity one could also suppose that nature provides a continuum of social skills, ranging from brute egocentricity on the one hand and altruism on the other. This would reflect the fact that human beings have different capacities for self-transcendence (the egoist less, the altruist more).

Supernaturalization of rituals makes them operate effectively. This is confirmed by the well known studies that the author quotes. However not all kinds of the supernaturalization of rituals make them effective. For example the Eucharist is certainly supernatural but it is not universally effective in keeping people in the Catholic Church. In addition these sacralised rituals can also be criticised, as happened in the Reformation when Martin Luther reduced the seven sacraments to two, which reduction actually led to strong Protestant Churches. Another example is the abolishing of rituals of costly sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem by Jesus.

On [5] | This is a highly interesting section. (1) A relational understanding of personhood is not only found in traditional cultures and religious groups. The whole of Karl Barth's theology is based on the idea of relatedness. Human relations, especially the relations between man and woman, should mirror the inner-Trinitarian relations of

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact one can argue from purely philosophical reasons for an ontology of relation. (2) The considerations of depersonalization are very interesting because they show how those important relations that include psycho/emotional sharing instead of function in relationships are. It seems that the little hint the author gives is of utmost importance when he identifies the change from quality to quantity as the root of what he calls depersonalisation. This merits far deeper consideration with regard to what went wrong in Western society. Rituals and in particular the lack of rituals in public life are certainly of significance here.

On [6] | An interesting conclusion: “If ritual made us human, then it is important to know if a de-ritualized world is a de-humanized one as well.” This is an important issue to raise. It is often argued the Protestantism is very poor with regard to the use of rituals in its services or at least much poorer than Catholicism. It is often argued that rituals tend to become empty, to be “only” formalistic, devoid of any deeper meaning. It is also argued that it is more important to develop a religious personality in Protestantism. Thus ritual would become less important. However in Protestantism a religious person emerges through God given belief. I surmise from this that it would be worthwhile to consider the relation between ritual, belief, and person from an evolutionary point of view. In addition I would further add that the notion of religion as a form of functionality is highly ambivalent. One can argue, and argue with good grounds, that religion starts being religion when functionality ends.

Afterword | This is a highly interesting article that deserves further consideration and research. My points of comment are:

1. Rituals are not restricted to the domain the author convincingly describes.
2. Rituals tend to become empty.
3. Rituals can become dysfunctional (for example in sacrifices).
4. The relation between rituals and ethics deserve further consideration.
5. Rituals as enhancing social commitment on the basis of costly signals and social conformity can also become counterproductive if they only work adaptively and exclude the possibility of social change and innovation.

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