THEMES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

RITES OF PASSAGE

EDITED BY JEAN HOLM WITH JOHN BOWKER

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THEMES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES SERIES

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Series Preface

The person who knows only one religion does not know any religion. This rather startling claim was made in 1873, by Friedrich Max Müller, in his book, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. He was applying to religion a saying of the poet Goethe: 'He who knows one language, knows none.'

In many ways this series illustrates Max Müller's claim. The diversity among the religious traditions represented in each of the volumes shows how mistaken are those people who assume that the pattern of belief and practice in their own religion is reflected equally in other religions. It is, of course, possible to do a cross-cultural study of the ways in which religions tackle particular issues, such as those which form the titles of the ten books in this series, but it soon becomes obvious that something which is central in one religion may be much less important in another. To take just three examples: the contrast between Islam's and Sikhism's attitudes to pilgrimage, in *Sacred Place*; the whole spectrum of positions on the authority of scriptures illustrated in *Sacred Writings*; and the problem which the titles, *Picturing God* and *Worship*, created for the contributor on Buddhism.

The series offers an introduction to the ways in which the themes are approached within eight religious traditions. Some of the themes relate particularly to the faith and practice of individuals and religious communities (*Picturing God, Worship, Rites of Passage, Sacred Writings, Myth and History, Sacred Place*); others have much wider implications, for society in general as well as for the religious communities themselves (*Attitudes to Nature, Making Moral Decisions, Human Nature and Destiny, Women in Religion*). This distinction, however, is not clear-cut. For instance, the 'sacred places' of Ayodhya and Jerusalem have figured in situations of national and

international conflict, and some countries have passed laws regulating, or even banning, religious worship.

Stereotypes of the beliefs and practices of religions are so widespread that a real effort, of both study and imagination, is needed in order to discover what a religion looks – and feels – like to its adherents. We have to bracket out, temporarily, our own beliefs and presuppositions, and 'listen in' to a religion's account of what *it* regards as significant. This is not a straightforward task, and readers of the books in this series will encounter a number of the issues that characterise the study of religions, and that have to be taken into account in any serious attempt to get behind a factual description of a religion to an understanding of the real meaning of the words and actions for its adherents.

First, the problem of language. Islam's insistence that the Arabic of the Qur'ān cannot be 'translated' reflects the impossibility of finding in another language an exact equivalent of many of the most important terms in a religion. The very word, Islam, means something much more positive to a Muslim than is suggested in English by 'submission'. Similarly, it can be misleading to use 'incarnation' for *avatāra* in Hinduism, or 'suffering' for *dukkha* in Buddhism, or 'law' for Torah in Judaism, or 'gods' for *kami* in Shinto, or 'heaven' for *T'ien* in Taoism, or 'name' for *Nām* in Sikhism.

Next, the problem of defining – drawing a line round – a religion. Religions do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are set. This can affect what they strenuously reject as well as what they may absorb into their pattern of belief and practice. And such influence is continuous, from a religion's origins (even though we may have no records from that period), through significant historical developments (which sometimes lead to the rise of new movements or sects), to its contemporary situation, especially when a religion is transplanted into a different region. For example, anyone who has studied Hinduism in India will be quite unprepared for the form of Hinduism they will meet in the island of Bali.

Even speaking of a 'religion' may be problematic. The term, 'Hinduism', for example, was invented by western scholars, and would not be recognised or understood by most 'Hindus'. A different example is provided by the religious situation in Japan, and the consequent debate among scholars as to whether they should speak of Japanese 'religion' or Japanese 'religions'.

Finally, it can be misleading to encounter only one aspect of a religion's teaching. The themes in this series are part of a whole interrelated network of beliefs and practices within each religious tradition, and need to be seen in this wider context. The reading lists at the end of each chapter point readers to general studies of the religions as well as to books which are helpful for further reading on the themes themselves.

Jean Holm
November 1993

List of Contributors

Jean Holm (*EDITOR*) was formerly Principal Lecturer in Religious Studies at Homerton College, Cambridge, teaching mainly Judaism and Hinduism. Her interests include relationships between religions; the relationship of culture to religion; and the way in which children are nurtured within a different cultural context. Her publications include *Teaching Religion in School* (Oxford University Press, 1975), *The Study of Religions* (Sheldon, 1977), *Growing up in Judaism* (Longman, 1990), *Growing up in Christianity*, with Romie Ridley (Longman, 1990) and *A Keyguide to Sources of Information on World Religions* (Mansell, 1991). She has edited three previous series: *Issues in Religious Studies*, with Peter Baelz (Sheldon), *Anselm Books*, with Peter Baelz (Lutterworth) and *Growing up in a Religion* (Longman).

John Bowker (*EDITOR*) was Professor of Religious Studies in Lancaster University, before returning to Cambridge to become Dean and Fellow of Trinity College. He is at present Professor of Divinity at Gresham College in London, and Adjunct Professor at the University of Pennsylvania and at the State University of North Carolina. He is particularly interested in anthropological and sociological approaches to the study of religions. He has done a number of programmes for the BBC, including the *Worlds of Faith* series, and a series on Islam and Hinduism for the World Service. He is the author of many books in the field of Religious Studies, including *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), which was awarded the biennial Harper Collins religious book prize in 1993, in the academic section.

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Christopher Lamb, Lecturer in Indian Religions in the School of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Middlesex University, is also Head of the newly founded Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue. His research is in the Tibetan religious biography, the *rnam-thar*, which he is pursuing at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. At present he is engaged in introducing the new computer technology into the teaching of traditional Humanities subjects. He has recently co-operated on a project, 'Animated Graphics in Industry', funded jointly by the Department of Education and Science and industrial partners, to produce, as a means of teaching Buddhist cosmology, a hypermedia version of the Tibetan game of *Rebirth*, invented in the early thirteenth century by the Sa-skya *pandita*, and he has also received external funding for two years to author a hypermedia package on Hindu polytheism. A longer-term project in view is a collaborative venture, *The Cathedral as Text*, which will use the structure of the medieval cathedral as its graphical metaphor, providing a hypertext resource for medieval studies, art history and religious studies.

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Introduction: Raising the Issues

Douglas Davies

The idea of rites of passage first emerged as a technical term in social anthropology early in the twentieth century. It described the ritual process accompanying the movement of people from one social status to another, as from being a boy to a man or from being a married woman to becoming a mother. As time went on the idea gained popularity outside anthropology so that, for example, in 1980, William Golding could publish a novel with the title *Rites of Passage* and expect it to mean something to the public at large.

Life and change

Behind the idea of rites of passage lies the fact that the whole of human life is marked by change. Babies are conceived, born, grow, mature, produce offspring and finally die, all as part of the biological facts of life. This has been studied by biologists and anthropologists in theories of ageing and changes in the 'life-course' (Spencer 1990). But this change is not simply a biological process. Because men and women are social as well as biological beings, these changes are not allowed to pass unnoticed. They come to have some value added to them and are interpreted through communal celebration of some sort.

In addition to the biological and social levels of significance, changes in human life have often been interpreted through religious ideas and marked by religious ritual. So, for example, the process of development from birth to death has often been extended into

another dimension as the dead are reckoned to become ancestors, or to enter some sort of life after death. The help of supernatural powers is often invoked to give power or protection to those undergoing these changes, as each of the following chapters demonstrates for the great religious traditions of the world.

Rites of passage

The actual idea of rites of passage emerged as an attempt to interpret the ritual events marking the various social changes experienced by members of society as they progressed through life. Many cultures use their religious beliefs to explain these periods of changing status and to organise the rites in a religious way. As a concept, 'rites of passage' was first developed in the study of preliterate and tribal societies but has, subsequently, come to be widely used in other social contexts, including those of complex modern societies. Its popularity has occasionally led to inappropriate application which makes it all the more important to understand how the idea arose and how best to adapt and apply it in modern societies.

It was in 1908 that the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep published a study of what he called *les rites de passage*. Van Gennep belonged to a group of anthropologists including the French scholars Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, whose work on ritual and beliefs was of fundamental importance for the sociology and anthropology of religion.[1] The theoretical background to his work lay in the desire to consider human action within a broad context of social life rather than as odd items of curious behaviour. He thought of anthropology as a way of interpreting apparently diverse forms of behaviour found the world over in a way that made sense of them and brought some order to what otherwise would be a confusing mass of facts. In the idea of rites of passage he believed he had discovered a key that would help unlock human behaviour, at least in the area of changing status in social life.

Van Gennep was an anthropologist who worked from the information provided by others, and he himself did not actually study peoples in other parts of the world. In *The Rites of Passage* he set himself the task of considering numerous rituals from preliterate societies in different parts of the world alongside material drawn from the sacred writings of Hindu, Jewish and Christian religions.

This was an example of the comparative method being used in anthropology as a first step to understanding human beings and their ways. The idea of 'rites of passage' is, then, a theory for interpreting changes of status in human society.

In the simplest of analogies van Gennep compared human societies with those houses that would have been so familiar to his European readers – houses possessing numerous rooms, corridors, and doors in which people live an ordinary life, moving from room to room through passages and across thresholds. By analogy, society was composed of particular social statuses with individuals passing from one status to another by passing over thresholds and moving through passages. Rites of passage were organised events in which, as it were, society took individuals by the hand and led them from one social status to another, conducting them across thresholds and holding them for a moment in a position when they were neither in one status nor another.

The three phases of rites of passage

The overall process of movement or change in social status was seen by van Gennep as falling into three phases which mirrored the leaving of one room, then being in no room at all while in transit before finally being received into the new room. So the total ritual process was made up of three rites: the first separated people from their original status, the second involved a period apart from normal status, and the third conferred a new status upon the individual. In line with his comparison between rites of passage and movement within a house, van Gennep described these three phases of rites of passage in terms of the Latin word *limen* meaning threshold or doorstep. He spoke of the three phases as (i) pre-liminal, (ii) liminal, and (iii) post-liminal.

Liminality

In more recent years the British anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) took up the middle phase and developed the idea of liminality by exploring the quality of relationships people have with each other during periods of change in social status. He suggested that during

liminal periods individuals experience what he called a sense of *communitas*, or intense awareness of being bound together in a community of shared experience. But Turner was also very much aware that ideas applicable to those tribal and preliterate peoples traditionally studied by anthropologists are not easily transferred to modern and urban societies.

With this caution in mind, Turner (1982) still thought there were aspects of preliterate and modern life that were similar and could, with some appropriate modification, be compared. The most significant modification came when he coined the word 'liminoid' to describe periods in modern society when the ordinary system of organised activity is put aside to enable people to share in a sense of the common oneness of human existence.

Hierarchy and *communitas*

Turner's thought works on the assumption that for much of the time societies operate a system of hierarchical and structured life where people exist with seniors above them and juniors below them and even with a degree of formal respect for their equals. But, periodically, this life of hierarchy and formal structure is interspersed with non-hierarchical and informal interaction, as though the underlying nature of being human breaks through to bring people together. He used the word *communitas* to describe the feeling which people might have while in a liminal state. Just as hierarchy divides, so *communitas* unites in many different sorts of activity. With this in mind Turner (1978) studied the place of pilgrimage, festivals, holidays and various celebrations in Christian cultures as examples of liminoid activity, as well as suggesting that monks, nuns and some others live a kind of permanently liminal life.

With the obvious exception of Islam, most of the following chapters interpret rites of passage in the narrower sense of formal change of social status from, for example, boy to man or girl to woman, from the single to the married state, from simply being married to becoming a parent, from being alive to being dead. But, in terms of Turner's theory of *liminoid* states, it would be perfectly possible to take a wider view of religions to focus on holy days and holidays, festivals and pilgrimages of many sorts.

Similarly, many examples of liminoid periods could be identified

in modern societies, especially in connection with sport and entertainment. One of the most interesting and extensive liminoid moments of world history came in London in July 1985 with the Live-Aid Concert organised by the pop musician Bob Geldoff as part of an attempt to raise money and express concern for poverty-stricken areas of the world. The concert was shared by literally millions of people all over the world through the medium of satellite television. His own account of his experience at the Wembley Stadium concert on that night provides a direct description of a liminoid quality of relationships:

> Everyone came on for the finale. There was a tremendous feeling of oneness on that stage. There had been no bitching, no displays of temperament all day. Now everyone was singing. They had their arms around each other . . . everyone was crying. Not the easy tears of showbiz but genuine emotion. . . . [On the way home] . . . people walked over to the car and hugged me. Some cried, 'Oh Bob, oh Bob', not sneering, not uncontrollable, just something shared and understood. 'I know', was all I could say. I did know. I wasn't sure what had happened in England, or everywhere else, but I 'knew'. Cynicism and greed and selfishness had been eliminated for a moment. It felt good. A lot of people had rediscovered something in themselves.
>
> (Geldoff, *Is That It?*, 1986: 310)

In Turner's terms, this was a moment when the underlying humanity of many individuals was shared as distinctions of fame and celebrity faded into insignificance behind their common human nature. It was an example of that spontaneous *communitas* (described below) and shows that even when societies change and become very modern under the influence of extensive media coverage and management, the dynamics of human nature can still have a powerful effect.

Rites and experience

Another dimension of rites of passage directly concerns the issue of personal experience or circumstances in relation to socially defined categories. Van Gennep was, for example, very clear on the fact that a gap might exist between personal circumstance and socially defined identity, as in his example that in some societies boys and

girls may be deemed adult either before or after they are biologically and sexually adult. As the Christianity chapter shows, sacraments announce the status or calling of individuals while recognising that it may take some time for their self-identity and status to match each other.

Stressing the goal

Not only did van Gennep think that rites of passage had three component rituals built into them, but he also thought that one of these three components would be emphasised depending upon the overall purpose of the ritual. So, for example, some funeral rites stress the pre-liminal aspect of separation from the land of the living, the consecration of monks or nuns might focus on a liminal existence apart from ordinary life, while marriage rites emphasise the post-liminal world of incorporation into a new family group as is very clear in the chapter on Hinduism.

Having said that, it is important to remember that rites of passage are often quite complicated and can have a variety of emphases within them. In the example of a funeral, the ritual can stress the incorporation of the deceased into the heavenly realm of the departed, while, as far as the mourners are concerned, the stress may lie on their separation from the dead.

There is another important point which emerges throughout the following chapters which, in a sense, resembles van Gennep's idea of ritual stress. It is that not all religions emphasise the same rites of passage. This is a complex issue because sometimes a particular culture utilises different religious traditions for different purposes. The chapter on Japanese religious culture makes this particularly clear in showing how people use Shinto rites in connection with birth but Buddhist rites for death. The separate chapter on Buddhism reinforces this by arguing that most life-stages are matters of secular arrangement and local custom. Death rites more directly reflect Buddhism's message of the transience of human life and the illusoriness of human identity. Christianity strongly underlines rites of incorporation into membership of the church through baptism, while Islam, for example, makes more of the place of pilgrimage as a kind of liminal separation in a mark of obedience to Allāh.

Kinds of *communitas*

Turner identified three sorts of *communitas* which he called *spontaneous*, *ideological*, and *normative*. Spontaneous *communitas* occurs when people suddenly find themselves caught up in a shared sense of oneness. This may be because of a joy in triumph in battle, in sport, or even in a musical event like the Live-Aid Concert mentioned above. Such moments can become part of a tradition of a movement or group, so much so that it becomes an ideal. That is how Turner sees ideological *communitas*, as an ideal which reflection on past events and the wisdom of hindsight bring to a focus as a prized value. The case of the Day of Pentecost in the chapter on Christianity can be understood in this way, as an account of an experience which can come to be an ideal of Christian life which present-day congregations might seek to emulate. This is the point where ideological and normative *communitas* overlap, for normative *communitas* refers to attempts at building the ideal of spontaneity into contemporary life. Societies or groups might, for example, seek to live according to that unity of purpose outlined in a sacred text. In the Christian case, the wish to get back to the biblical form of fellowship expresses a desire for authenticity and truth which has motivated many protest movements in Christianity over the centuries. Other groups realise that history cannot be relived in this way, but might still wish to express the value of the ideal.

Status and identity

It is important to realise that there is a distinction to be made between status and identity, a difference that van Gennep also recognised. At its simplest, status can be viewed as coming from society, as something which is accorded to an individual either because of their birth-right or else through personal achievement. Identity, by contrast, reflects the more internal process of becoming what one is supposed to be. It often takes time for the internal change to match the externally granted position.

In the western view of 'the self', a sense of identity is radically important for an individual's well-being, and forms part of what it means to be an active member of society. Identity involves our own sense of who we are in and through the various statuses we hold.

Self-identity emerges and grows as we come to grasp our various social statuses and live them out. Rites of passage often help prepare people for that sense of identity that needs to run alongside the social status accorded them. Van Gennep described how society seemed to take people by the hand, leading them from one status to another, and helping them understand themselves. The degree to which people harmonise their sense of self-identity in relation to their official social status is the degree to which they will flourish as individuals and play a creative part in the social world. Van Gennep appreciated that periods of transition between statuses was, potentially, dangerous for individuals as reflected in the caution many religions take on behalf of individuals. This is very apparent in the chapter discussing Buddhist death rites and the process of trying to assist the soul in its ongoing journey.

The importance of identity within transition rites is reflected in several chapters, on Sikhism and Judaism for example, as they discuss the new or special names given to people at times of initiation. Sometimes identity is linked to the way particular religions have their own explicit theories of life-development. This is very clearly shown in the case of Hinduism with its four stages of life.

Reciprocity

One recurring theme of rites of passage is that of gift-giving. It is very clearly described in the following chapters for Japanese and Sikh rites but is also echoed in most of the other chapters. It is important not to ignore this rather obvious dimension of transition rituals because it helps emphasise the profoundly social nature of rites of passage.

Earlier in this introduction the names of van Gennep and Marcel Mauss were linked, as scholars committed to giving full weight to the social nature of human beings. Mauss wrote a highly influential anthropological study of gift-giving, published originally in 1925 (and translated into English in 1954). This study – *The Gift* – shows that gifts are not the free and voluntary things we often say they are; instead they are expected to be returned in some shape or form as part of ongoing networks of relationships. Reciprocal relationships of this sort are a fundamental part of life and entail mutual obligations. In rites of passage new sorts of obligations are created;