

Anthropologische Forschungen stehen gegenwärtig im Brennpunkt interdisziplinärer Debatten. Insbesondere in den Bereichen der Biologie und den empirischen Anthropologien sind in den letzten Jahrzehnten rasante Fortschritte zu verzeichnen. Eine Jahresschrift zur Interdisziplinären Anthropologie stellt sich der Aufgabe, den interdisziplinären Dialog in der aktuellen anthropologischen Forschung darzustellen und versteht sich daher als ein strikt Disziplinen übergreifendes Publikationsmedium. Dieser Anspruch manifestiert sich in der dialogischen Form des Diskurstils (in jeder Ausgabe wird ein Schwerpunktthema im Dreischritt Leitartikel, Kommentare, Replik diskursiv thematisiert), der mit Berichten zu interdisziplinären Projekten im anthropologischen Forschungsfeld ergänzt wird. Ein Rezensionsteil bespricht aktuelle wissenschaftliche Publikationen zu relevanten Aspekten, die Rubrik ‚Kalender‘ widmet sich einem biographischen oder bibliographischen Jubiläumsereignis.

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## **How Rituals Elicit Shared Sacred Values**

**Foreword** | In “The Ritual Origins of Humanity”, Matt Rossano offers an important contribution to our understanding of ritual’s role in the development of humanity. Among the many merits of his target article, Rossano’s insights into the differences between chimpanzee and human capacities for group commitment are particularly pertinent and valuable. While we are in general agreement with Rossano’s approach and while we share his sentiment that ritual played a critical – and often overlooked – role in human social evolution, we think Rossano’s argument is in need of further elucidation. Specifically, although it is clear that apes are limited in their ability to elicit shared values amongst group members, it is not obvious how human rituals achieve what ape and other nonhuman rituals are unable to do, that is, provide a foundation for collective values. Our comments are aimed at filling this lacuna in Rossano’s argument.

We concur with Rossano that human rituals are able to generate shared values. Moreover, we strongly agree that sacred commitments are created through ritual performance.<sup>1</sup> Yet, not all rituals have such effects. As Rossano notes, nonhuman ritual performances directly indicate the intentions of the performer. Human ritual performances, however, not only signal such intentions but they also specify abstract values. How are human rituals able to point to abstractions, defining some ideas and objects as sacred, while nonhuman rituals appear to be limited to specifying the immediate intentions of performers?

The work of anthropologist Roy Rappaport, we suggest, offers insights into this question. Rappaport (1999) argues that human rituals are distinguished from nonhuman rituals by language. All rituals contain an indexical component that signifies the current mental and/or physiological state of the performer. Nonhuman rituals, however, are limited to these indexical signals. The mating rituals of many bird species, the greeting rituals of apes and monkeys, and the submission postures of dogs that Rossano describes indicate the intentions of the performer – respectively, a readiness to mate, willingness to socially engage, and a demarcation

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<sup>1</sup> Alcorta, Candace S. / Sosis, Richard: Ritual, Emotion, and Sacred Symbols. The Evolution of Religion as an Adaptive Complex, in: *Human Nature* 16 (2005), No. 4, p. 323-359.

of play activity. Rappaport contends that human rituals often contain another layer of complexity that results from the amalgamation of embodied action and recursive grammatical communication – language – in ritual forms. The coupling of language and stereotyped movements allows the embodiment of abstract values and ideals. Rappaport refers to this aspect of ritual as canonical; that is, the component of ritual that contains the moral codes and social obligations of a community. He distinguishes the indexical from the canonical as follows: “Whereas that which is signified by the indexical is confined to the here and now, the referents of the canonical are not. They always make references to processes or entities, material or putative, outside the ritual, in words and acts that have, by definition, been spoken or performed before. Whereas the indexical is concerned with the immediate the canonical is concerned with the enduring”.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the prayers, for example, of a Sunday churchgoer. The act of reciting a prayer in church is repetitive, formalized, and stereotyped; in short, it is a ritual.<sup>3</sup> The indexical component of prayer refers to how a person recites prayers: the intensity and fervor of her vocalizations, the mood she expresses, and the interest she conveys. The indexical component of prayer is observable and interpretable by fellow congregants. It conveys the inner state of the worshipper. Prayer recited with enthusiasm indicates commitment to the church community and suggests agreement with its values and beliefs. Conversely, mumbling prayers with a scowl on one’s face more than likely intimates that sitting in the pews is a consequence of social pressures, maybe from a spouse or friend, rather than personal commitment to the church. Prayer, however, is not limited to indexical signals. In addition to body movements and physical expressions, prayer is an articulation of specific words. These words, the canonical component of prayer, contain the values and moral codes of the church community. As Rappaport (1999) observes, rituals consist of movements and words not encoded by the performer. Indeed, the communal prayers recited on a Sunday morning were not written by anyone offering them.

2 Rappaport, Roy A.: The Obvious Aspects of Ritual, in: *Ecology, Meaning & Religion*, edited by Roy A. Rappaport, Berkeley 1979, p. 179.

3 It is worth noting that while Rossano defines rituals as “emancipated” from their initial function, incorporating emancipation into a definition of ritual may be blurring an important distinction (see Tinbergen, Nikolaas: *On Aims and Methods of Ethology*, in: *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie* 20 (1963), No. 4, p. 410-433.) between a behavioral pattern (ritual) and the ontogeny of the behavioral pattern (the process of ritualization). We recommend, following others (e.g., Huxley, Julian: *A Discussion on Ritualization of Behaviour in Animals and Man*, in: *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Science* 251 (1966), No. 4, p. 475-476.), that emancipation remains a defining characteristic of ritualization, rather than ritual.

Consequently, the meaning of the words themselves cannot provide a window into the current mental or physical state of the worshipper; the same words are recited week after week, regardless of subjective mood. Rather, the antiquity of the prayers points to a deep tradition and their contents suggest enduring values. According to Rappaport, these abstract notions can only be the referents of ritual signals when embodied action is conjoined with language in ritual forms.

It is important to emphasize that ritual performance does not necessarily indicate belief in or commitment to the values of the community. As noted, a worshipper may find herself in the pews because her husband insists on her attendance and presumably because the benefits of marital stability outweigh the costs of church attendance. Participation in ritual, however, does signal the acceptance that one is obligated to follow the values explicitly and implicitly articulated in the ritual. Rappaport insightfully observed that whereas belief is a private, internal state, acceptance is a public, external state. Simply by attending and participating one has publically indicated one’s inclusion in the community. Again, one might not believe in God, Jesus, or any of the church’s teachings, but participation carries obligations to follow the values implicit in the church. Through ritual participation one is now at risk of being labeled a heretic rather than an infidel.

Ritual thus requires an understanding of the tripartite relationship between the performer, the signal (e.g., uttering words of prayer), and the interpretation of the signal (“She is devoted to the tradition and is therefore one of us”). Rituals compel a collectively shared understanding of others’ religious actions. Speaking in tongues, for instance, to demonstrate one’s allegiance with the Holy Spirit at a Catholic Mass would not be a successful signal of acceptance of Catholic doctrine as glossolalia is not an acceptable practice among contemporary Catholics.<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, the sacred values that adherents share structurally take the form of institutions.<sup>5</sup> Institutions, according to Searle (1995), are the transference of brute facts (X) to social facts (Y) in a particular context (C). In a Catholic service (C), for instance, a piece of bread (X) may represent the body of Christ (Y). Among

4 Purzycki, Benjamin G. / Sosis, Richard: Religious Concepts as Necessary Components of the Adaptive Religious System, in: *The Nature of God. Evolution and Religion*, edited by Ulrich Frey, Marburg 2010, p. 37-59.

5 D’Andrade, Roy: *A Study of Personal and Cultural Values. American, Japanese, and Vietnamese*, New York 2008; Purzycki, Benjamin G. / Sosis, Richard: The Religious System as Adaptive. Cognitive Flexibility, Public Displays, and Acceptance, in: *The Biological Evolution of Religious Mind and Behavior*, edited by Eckart Voland and Wulf Schiefenhövel, New York 2009, p. 243-256; Purzycki, Benjamin G. / Sosis, Richard: Religious Concepts as Necessary Components of the Adaptive Religious System, in: *The Nature of God. Evolution and Religion*, edited by Ulrich Frey, Marburg 2010, p. 37-59.

Jews (C), circular material covering one's head (X) may represent awe of God (Y). Notice that there is individual variation in the acceptance and understanding of Y; Catholics may not interpret the sacrament literally just as Jews might associate wearing a kippah as a statement of religious affiliation rather than awe of God, the Talmudic rationalization.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, ritual actions create social realities that result in largely shared sacred values, despite inherent diversity.<sup>7</sup>

Attempts to reduce the role of ritual within religious communities, most evident in various forms of Protestant Christianity, are informative. By delegitimizing ritual's power to communicate and construct social worlds, Protestant communities necessarily place a heavy burden on beliefs and testimonies.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, shared sacred values in such communities appear to employ specific cognitions. For example, the distinction between theological correctness and incorrectness revealed by cognitive scientists of religion<sup>9</sup> suggests that there is an invoked type of deliberate religious thought necessary for communicating group membership (theologically correct), and a level of cognition that exhibits real-time processing (theologically incorrect). Theologically correct concepts, therefore, can serve as external indexical signals of group membership.<sup>10</sup> Since stated beliefs so often diverge with how supernatural agents are thought about in real-time<sup>11</sup> they may be useful as signals of group affiliation. If internal sentiments such as beliefs are to serve as signals though, they must be publicly pronounced, understood, and interpreted appropriately by receivers. It is this collectively-determined "cognitive palatability"

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- 6 Purzycki, Benjamin G. / Sosis, Richard: Religious Concepts as Necessary Components of the Adaptive Religious System, in: *The Nature of God. Evolution and Religion*, edited by Ulrich Frey, Marburg 2010, p. 37-59.
- 7 Kiper, Jordan / Sosis, Richard: Moral Intuitions and the Religious System. An Adaptationist Account, in: *Philosophy, Theology, and Science* 1 (2014), p. 172-199; Purzycki, Benjamin G. / Sosis, Richard: The Extended Religious Phenotype and the Adaptive Coupling of Ritual and Belief, in: *Israel Journal of Ecology and Evolution* 59 (2013), p. 99-108; Sosis, Richard: Religions as Complex Adaptive Systems, Paper Presented at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton/New Jersey 2012.
- 8 Harvey, Graham: *Food, Sex & Strangers. Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*, Durham 2013.
- 9 e.g., Barrett, Justin L.: Theological Correctness. Cognitive Constraint and the Study of Religion, in: *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 11 (1998), p. 325-339; Slone, Jason D.: *Theological Incorrectness. Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't*, Oxford 2004.
- 10 Alcorta, Canadace S. / Sosis, Richard: Ritual, Emotion, and Sacred Symbols. The Evolution of Religion as an Adaptive Complex, in: *Human Nature* 16 (2005), No. 4, p. 323-359.
- 11 Barrett, Justin L. / Keil Frank C.: Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity. Anthropomorphism in God Concepts, in: *Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1996), Issue 3, p. 219-247.

that sets the parameters of shared sacred values.<sup>12</sup> As such, testimonies evoking theologically correct concepts effectively operate as displays of group commitment in these communities, whereas invoking theologically incorrect versions of religious concepts (e.g., limiting God's abilities to human capacities) are more likely to elicit sanctions for heresy.<sup>13</sup>

Before concluding we raise one further concern about Rossano's argument. It seems unlikely to us that the universality of religion can be explained as resulting from processes of group competition in which more cooperative groups, supported by ritual routines, outcompeted less cooperative ones. Rossano describes hominin cooperation as emerging from selective pressures that favored prosocial strategies under particular ecological conditions that demanded collective action for energy production. If accurate, we would expect variation in the intensity and complexity of cooperation across groups to be a function of variation in cooperation needed for resource acquisition. Environments in which resources require more cooperation for successful resource acquisition will develop greater prosocial cultural structures, such as norms for extensive food sharing, than environments in which cooperation is less critical for foraging success. It is not clear, however, why communities with such cultural structures would necessarily outcompete those that are less cooperative. If communities face the same environmental conditions we can readily understand how the group that more effectively solves the challenges of capturing energy is more likely to endure. But do cooperative foraging strategies somehow translate into strong political and military structures such that we should expect cooperative foragers to outcompete other groups encountering different environmental conditions? We suspect, rather, that the transmission of religious ideas is more likely a consequence of learning biases and imitation of successful groups,<sup>14</sup> such as is often observed when missionaries engage with indigenous populations, rather than cooperative groups successfully outcompeting those that are less cooperative. For example, in the lead author's fieldwork on Ifaluk Atoll in Micronesia he observed a highly cooperative population – indeed, his research was aimed at understanding the cooperative fishing and building that was prevalent on

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- 12 Purzycki, Benjamin G. / Sosis, Richard: Religious Concepts as Necessary Components of the Adaptive Religious System, in: *The Nature of God. Evolution and Religion*, edited by Ulrich Frey, Marburg 2010, p. 37-59.
- 13 Purzycki, Benjamin G. / Sosis, Richard: Religious Concepts as Necessary Components of the Adaptive Religious System, in: *The Nature of God. Evolution and Religion*, edited by Ulrich Frey, Marburg 2010, p. 37-59.
- 14 Richerson, Peter J. / Boyd, Robert: *Not by Genes Alone. How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*, Chicago 2005.

the island<sup>15</sup> – that was undergoing a transition toward Catholicism imported from strongly individualistic Western cultures.<sup>16</sup> The transition from Ifaluk's traditional animistic religious system to Catholicism was not a consequence of a cooperative society outcompeting a non-cooperative one, but rather a cooperative society that sought to imitate the norms of a highly successful and powerful, albeit individualistic, society. Similarly, in Fiji, where the second author conducts fieldwork, access to military and material resources promoted conversion from a traditional religious system that supported a redistribution economy to British Wesleyan Methodism.<sup>17</sup>

We conclude by expressing our thanks to the editors and Matt Rossano for the opportunity to engage with such a stimulating article. We share Rossano's conviction that the study of ritual is vital to our understanding of what it means to be human, and we hope our comments have productively advanced this discussion.

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15 Sosis, Richard / Feldstein, Sharon / Hill, Kim: Bargaining Theory and Cooperative Fishing Participation on Ifaluk Atoll, in: *Human Nature* 9 (1998), p. 163-203.

16 Sosis, Richard: Ifaluk Atoll. An Ethnographic Account, in: *eHRAF World Cultures*, edited by Carol Ember, New Haven/Connecticut 2005.

17 Shaver, John: The Evolution of Stratification in Fijian Ritual Participation, in: *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 5 (2015), Issue 2, p. 101-117.

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