CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARDS A GENERIC MODEL OF RELIGIOUS RITUAL

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SUMMARY

In this chapter I first identify, somewhat synoptically, three mainstream approaches in the empirical study of ritual. Secondly, I show how some elements of these approaches can be incorporated into a simple theoretical model that provides a generic framework for subsequent elaboration. Thirdly, I illustrate that aim by focusing on one aspect of the model, namely ritualising as a specific activity.

INTRODUCTION

Ritual is one of the most characteristic and manifest of religious phenomena. As the dedicated location of divine worship it lies at the heart of a religion’s identity. This is where its confession is unambiguously demonstrated in the public domain. Ritual is the very practice of a religion. The fact that ritual participation seems to be affected by the secularisation process, albeit primarily in Western European countries, has raised questions about the relation between religion and ritual. Is ritual a necessary condition for religion? Are the characteristics of ritual within a religion similar to those outside it? Does ritual necessarily imply the religious attributes of belonging and believing? The fact that I phrase these questions in rather formal, abstract terms assumes a further question. While one may easily agree that denominational frames of reference for religious ritual, like Catholic liturgy as a theological discipline, are appropriate to clarify and legitimise prevailing ritual codes and traditions, are they also suitable to conceptualise and explain the characteristics of religious ritual in a broader, theoretical context? After extensively studying ritual from the confessional perspective of Dutch Roman Catholic ministry (Schilderman and Felling, 2003; Schilderman, 2005), I grew interested in the foundational aspects of religious ritual. I have dealt with these questions elsewhere from a conceptual (2007a) and an epistemological (2007b) perspective.
Here I broaden my project by examining the socio-scientific field of religious ritual with a view to constructing an analytical model of religious ritual that can be used in empirical research. More specifically, I hope to determine to what extent ritual can be regarded as a necessary dimension of religion; and, if so, how it relates to believing and belonging as other, more or less obvious dimensions of religion. In so doing I will avoid a classical approach that merely studies religious ritual in terms of confessional problems in church history and systematic theology, which as a rule do not really strive for an analytical clarification of the empirical characteristics of worship. Hence I do not posit a normative theological problem. Although I find normative theological questions and issues crucially important for analysing worship, I will look into that aspect in another publication. I focus here on socio-scientific theories that allow us to analyse, explain and compare the formal, ‘secular’ characteristics of ritual in religions. Ultimately my aim is to provide a simple model of religious ritual that can be used for conceptual design in empirical research.

**Socio-Scientific Approaches**

The history of the social sciences presents several paradigms for studying ritual as a religious practice. If one opts for an action theory paradigm as an analytical frame of reference, a basic, primordial question is whether ritual makes any sense apart from its physical manifestation. Some scholars maintain that ritual has no meaning at all: it is a self-contained practice performed purely for its own sake. Thus Staal argues that ritual has no meaning beyond its self-evident practice. It is a ‘mindless’, purely self-referential execution of a prescribed action sequence. According to him, theoretical problems arise only to the extent that external goals or functions of ritual come to be assumed that disregard the fact that ritual may be performed without any beliefs on the part of the participants (Staal, 1979; 1984). This view, however, blurs the distinction between behaviour and action. Weber defines action as behaviour associated with personal meaning (Weber, 1976: 1). According to this Weberian assumption, ritual would lose its action characteristics as soon as its behavioural characteristics are regarded as coinciding with its meaning. Even if one could establish that primitives do not perceive their rituals as significant for their social and cultural identity, one would have a hard time proving that modern worshippers