The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Overview

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Among the many theories of myth and many theories of ritual, the myth and ritual theory is distinctive in connecting myths to rituals. The myth and ritual, or myth-ritualist, theory maintains that myths and rituals operate together. The theory claims not that myths and rituals happen to go hand in hand but that they must. In its most uncompromising form, the theory contends that myths and rituals cannot exist without each other. In a milder form, the theory asserts that myths and rituals originally exist together but may subsequently go their separate ways. In a still milder form of the theory, myths and rituals can arise separately but subsequently coalesce.

Original Formulation: Smith

In a few introductory pages of his Lectures on the Religion of the Semites the Victorian biblicist and Arabist William Robertson Smith pioneered the myth-ritualist theory. Smith begins by warning against the anachronistic “modern habit ... to look at religion from the side of belief rather than of practice” (Lectures, 1st ed., 17). Instead of first looking for the “creed” that will provide “the key to ritual and practice” (p. 17), one should do the reverse: first find the ritual, which will unlock the creed. Indeed, one should not even

expect to find a creed, for "the antique [i.e., ancient and primitive] religions had for the most part no creed; they consisted entirely of institutions and practices" (p. 18). Smith grants that ancients and primitives doubtless performed rituals for some reason: "No doubt men will not habitually follow certain practices without attaching a meaning to them" (p. 18). But he claims that the meaning was secondary and could even fluctuate: "as a rule we find that while the practice was rigorously fixed, the meaning attached to it was extremely vague, and the same rite was explained by different people in different ways, without any question of orthodoxy or heterodoxy arising in consequence" (p. 18).

In classical Greece, for example, "certain things were done at a temple, and people were agreed that it would be impious not to do them. But if you had asked why they were done, you would probably have had several mutually exclusive explanations from different persons, and no one would have thought it a matter of the least religious importance which of these you chose to adopt" (p. 18). Moreover, the explanations given for a ritual would not have stirred strong feelings. Rather than formal declarations of belief—creeds—the various explanations would have been stories, or myths, which would have simply described "the circumstances under which the rite first came to be established, by the command or by the direct example of the god" (p. 18). "The rite, in short, was connected not with a dogma [i.e., creed] but with a myth" (p. 18). "In all the antique religions, mythology takes the place of dogma" (p. 18).

At the same time, ritual was more important in antique religion than myth: "this mythology was no essential part of ancient religion, for it had no sacred sanction and no binding force on the worshippers. The myths connected with individual sanctuaries and ceremonies were merely part of the apparatus of the worship; they served to excite the fancy and sustain the interest of the worshipper; but he was often offered a choice of several accounts of the same thing, and, provided that he fulfilled the ritual with accuracy, no one cared what he believed about its origin" (p. 19). Consequently, Smith spurns the attention conventionally accorded not only creed but also myth: "mythology ought not to take the prominent place that is too often assigned to it in the scientific study of ancient faiths" (p. 19). Smith goes as far as to declare that