

Communicating through ritual



John Sprague examines how communities use ritual to convey knowledge

The holiday season is a time of relaxation with family, preparation for the new academic year for those in southern hemisphere schools, and a time for important religious festivals for the world's practising Christians and Jews.

For many religious believers, 'faith' is constituted by far more than simply holding particular beliefs. Historians, scientists, mathematicians and ethicists all hold beliefs as well, but religious knowledge systems also *enact* their beliefs through ritual in a way that we don't see in the other areas of knowledge (AOKs). Think of any religious worship service and you are thinking

of a series of rituals that the shared community of religious believers use to communicate their core beliefs to others in the community, but without sitting them down and saying, 'learn this' as you might see a school teacher saying. Ritual is an incredibly effective way of disseminating the knowledge of a community to individuals in that community. Not all rituals are religious in nature, but rituals do need to be vehicles of communication of deeply held cultural beliefs.

Stars and stripes

In terms of non-religious rituals, for example, many Americans hold certain attitudes and behaviours related to their flag. Very few Americans (myself included) would feel comfortable dragging the US flag along the ground. But while many nationalities would see this as a sign of disrespect to their country,



Americans often feel a particular ritualised duty, not just to their country, but to the thing that is the flag. There is a ritual purity owed to that piece of cloth and dragging it or allowing it even to touch the ground is to violate some deeply held belief about the respect owed to that piece of cloth.

This belief is more than taught, it is imprinted on the consciousness through a ritualised pledging of allegiance to that piece of cloth every morning in American classrooms all over the country. This ritual creates the cultural attitude in the individual in a way that simply telling them wouldn't achieve. The New Zealand Rugby team's *haka* is another excellent example of communicating beliefs about the New Zealand team, both to the team members themselves (unity, community, preparedness for 'war') and to their opponents (power, strength and fear).

Religious rituals

In the religious sphere, prayer rituals communicate deep beliefs about faith. The foundational belief of Judaism is captured by the Shema, a passage from Deuteronomy in the Torah: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength... Tie these commandments as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads' (Deuteronomy 6:6–8).

As a way of fulfilling this commandment about commandments, some Jews will write out the opening of this passage on a small scroll and put them in small boxes, which they then tie around their left arms and foreheads — literally wrapping themselves in the word of God. This prayer ritual physically impresses the most fundamental religious beliefs upon their bodies and minds.

Muslims use a series of prayer rituals that again imprint religious belief literally onto their bodies.

The words 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are both derived from the Arabic word for 'submission'. The prayer rituals enforce the importance of the submission to Allah into both the Muslim's experience of time (with the expectation to pray five times a day) and his or her physical experience of God. During *salah* (prayer) Muslims kneel and bow before God in a position called *sajdah*. This physical action is a powerful method of demonstrating the belief that God is all powerful and deserving of our complete submission. Watching tens of thousands of people of all walks of life from all over the world performing *sajdah* in the same motion around the Ka'bah in Makkah is an incredibly powerful reminder of this belief, particularly to the worshipper. Performing these rituals day in, day out will communicate this belief in a fundamental way.

School is not the only place where we learn. The rituals of religious communities and the rituals we find in society communicate powerful messages and embed knowledge deep within us, often in ways that are non-conscious, but no less powerful because of it.

Further reading

Further explorations of knowledge and ritual:

Rappaport, R. (1979) 'The obvious aspects of ritual' in *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, Berkeley, North Atlantic Books.

Jennings, T. W. (1982) 'On Ritual Knowledge', *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 62, No. 2, pp. 111–127.

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