

Roy A. Rappaport

**RITUAL AND RELIGION
IN THE MAKING OF
HUMANITY**



Foreword

Emile Durkheim published *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* in 1912, on the eve of the First World War. The war consolidated a process which had been building up for at least three decades and which we can now see laid the foundations for the kind of society familiar to our twentieth-century world. This society was organized by and for centralized states, staffed by a professional class of scientific experts. Durkheim himself, as the principal founder of the discipline of sociology, had taken the lead in establishing the new sciences of society which would underpin the activities of this class. Yet in *The Elementary Forms* he posed an immense problem for the future of humanity. Science appeared to have driven religion from the field as a serious intellectual ground for the organization of society; but it could not perform the function of religion. This left a huge hole in the spiritual existence of modern people which Durkheim knew must be filled, but he himself was powerless to imagine how.

Roy Rappaport's book, the result of more than three decades' investigation into the relationship between religion, society and ecology, is, in my view, the first systematic attempt to address the question which Durkheim left unanswered. As such, it deserves to be seen as a milestone in the anthropology of religion comparable in scope to his great predecessor's work. For Rappaport is attempting here nothing less than to lay the groundwork for the development of a new religion adequate to the circumstances humanity will encounter in the twenty-first century. His stated aims are more modest, namely to review the anthropological evidence which might allow for a more comprehensive understanding of ritual as the practical matrix of religious life. But the unity of this work derives from his implicit desire to inform future attempts to construct a

religion compatible with the scientific laws ruling a world for which humanity is ultimately responsible, as that part of life on this planet which is able to think.

Religion belongs to a set of terms which also includes art and science. It is a measure of the declining intellectual credibility of established religions that science, which began as a form of knowledge opposed to religious mysticism, is now most often opposed to the arts. If science may crudely be said to be the drive to know the world objectively and art is pre-eminently an arena of subjective self-expression, religion typically addresses both sides of the subject-object relationship by connecting what is inside each of us to something outside. Religion, etymologically speaking, binds us to an external force; it stabilises our meaningful interaction with the world, provides an anchor for our volatility.

Durkheim's concept of religion was consistent with this formulation, but it contained some radically distinctive elements. He divided experience into the known and the unknown. What we know is everyday life, the mundane features of our routine existence; and we know it as individuals trapped in a sort of private busy-ness. But this life is subject to larger forces whose origin we do not know, to natural disasters, social revolutions and, above all, death. We desperately wish to influence these unknown causes of our fate which we recognize as being both individual and collective in their impact; at the very least we would like to establish a connection with them. And so, for Durkheim, religion was the organized attempt to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, conceived of as the profane world of ordinary experience and a sacred, extraordinary world located outside that experience.

He recognized that we normally conceive of the sacred in terms of spiritual powers, summarized in the world religions as God. He proposed, however, that what is ultimately unknown to us is our collective being in society. We find it very difficult to grasp how our actions arise from belonging to others; and it is this property of collective life which is highlighted in the chief mechanism of religion, ritual. Through ritual, Durkheim argues, we worship our unrealized powers of shared existence, society, and call it God. Sometimes we objectify the spirit world as nature and worship that. This natural religion, associated at the time Durkheim wrote with the "totemism" of the Australian Aborigines, he considered to be the matrix of all systematic knowledge, including science. It was thus one of the tasks of *The Elementary Forms* to demonstrate that science springs from the same desire to connect the known and the unknown that spawned religion.

The chaos of everyday life, by this formulation, attains some stability to the degree that it is informed by ideas representing the social facts of a shared collective existence. Science, sociology for example, can help us to be more aware of this; but, in general, scientific knowledge and method undermine the coherence and stability of culture. Durkheim believed that the central task of ritual was to instill these collective representations in each of us. In a celebrated expression, he spoke of the "effervescence" of ritual experience. In a state of spiritual ecstasy we internalize the lessons which bind us to each other in social life. He did not elaborate on this rather important conception of the socialization process. Roy Rappaport's book, among other things, may be read as an extended treatment of this very point.

It is not the task of this Foreword to pre-empt the contents of what follows. Apart from anything else, Rappaport is unusually lucid in setting out his own agenda and sticking to it. Indeed I would argue that this book is as much a work in analytical philosophy as it is an essay composed within the anthropological discipline which acknowledges Durkheim as a founder. For the author is relentlessly precise in his use of words, a precision which is alleviated by the robustness of a prose which knows that it is borne along by the currents of an impressive intellectual tradition. The second chapter, for example, is as fine a review of what ritual has been taken to be as will be found anywhere. Moreover, Rappaport's own definition, starting from a parsimonious emphasis on formality, invariance and tradition, builds over no less than eleven chapters (out of fourteen) into an analysis of ritual which, for sheer comprehensiveness and consistency, has no parallel in the literature.

Roy Rappaport gives such rigorous and explicit attention to ritual because he finds in it the ground where religion is made. He is aware, as was Durkheim, that religion has not fared well in modern times, having been removed from the governance of society's leading institutions and left instead as an irrational palliative for the growing mass of the world's outsiders. He knows that, if the pattern of our own rotten century is repeated in the twenty-first, there will not be a twenty-second. This is because a pseudo-religion of money and commodity consumption is supervising the destruction of nature and society on a scale which is unsustainable in even the fairly short run. Rappaport believes that one possible answer to the world's crisis would be a religion founded on a postmodern science grounded in ecology, rather than astronomy – so that human society might be conceived of as being inside rather than outside life on this planet.

This is the meaning of the book's title. In Rappaport's usage, humanity is a personal quality, a collective noun and a historical project. The project of achieving our potential to be collectively human is, in a sense, barely begun. It is entailed, however, in our origin as a species, in the discovery of language and with it religion. The inclusive feature of religion is "holiness", a concept which embraces the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine. Holiness is whole (and cognate to healthy); religion, which is constantly being made and remade through ritual, is the means we have of getting in touch with the wholeness of things. Increasingly, we are becoming aware that human society has a unity defined by its occupation of a place in the life of this planet. That place has hitherto often been heedlessly destructive. The task is to assume responsibility for our stewardship of life as a whole. Religion is indispensable to that task and ritual is its active ground; hence the echoes of Durkheim's *la vie religieuse*.

Between the two books lies almost a century of war, bureaucracy and science. Anthropology has in that time become a major academic specialization whose achievements underpin Rappaport's work. But he also looks to theologians, psychologists, ethologists and philosophers for the means of developing his arguments. In this he is true to the discipline's origins in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant coined the term "anthropology" in its modern sense for a series of lectures (*Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*) which was published towards the end of his life. In them he posed the question of how humanity might make a cosmopolitan society beyond the boundaries of states; and he found the answer in a comparative inquiry into cognition, aesthetics and ethics. For Kant, community and common sense were generated through social interaction; the aesthetic was primarily social, having its roots in good food, good talk and good company. This is the urbane source for Durkheim's emphasis on a more primitive conception of ritual; and Rappaport takes up once more, as Durkheim could not, the project of imagining how ritual might sustain a social life of planetary rather than merely national scope.

The universals of nineteenth-century anthropology have been discredited in our own century. And this was not difficult, since they were founded on Western imperialism's ability to unify the world as an unequal association of races governed by what was taken at the time to be the last word in rationality. Since then, another vision of world society has taken hold, a fragmented world of self-sufficient nation-states reflected in an ideology of cultural relativism which insists that people

everywhere have a right to their own way of life, however barbarous. This vision has become so central to the academic anthropology of our day that Rappaport's treatise will seem to be anomalous. Of late it has come to be held that big, closely argued books on universal themes are out-of-date. Minor essays on elusive topics, ethnography for its own sake and evasion of matters of general public concern are the norm. If this book does nothing else, it makes a claim that anthropology needs to be animated by more ambitious intellectual projects which look backwards, to be sure, but also forwards to the world we hope to inhabit in the near future.

Roy Rappaport's enterprise is made possible by social conditions at the end of the twentieth century. We are living through a communications revolution sustained by the convergence of telephones, television and computers. The progressive integration of global exchange networks since the Second World War has brought about an unprecedented capacity for movement and connection on a planetary scale. At the same time we are increasingly aware of the damage being done to the environment and of the obscene inequality which marks world society. The states in which Durkheim placed implicit confidence as the sole means of organizing society are now in disarray. No government anywhere commands widespread popular support, with the possible exception of Nelson Mandela's.

We know that we are at the end of something and on the verge of something else. Rappaport does not discuss the historical context of his arguments in any way; yet this book's remarkable integrity derives from his conviction that our twentieth-century world of nation-states must soon give way to a new one premised on the need for forging a common human agenda. In other words, we need new conceptions of the universal. Religion once provided such conceptions. Anthropology filled the gap when religion was driven out by science; but it is not itself religion, merely the means towards formulating fresh approaches to religion on the basis of sound knowledge of the human condition.

It might be argued that the world is full of religion at present, as indeed it is. But the vehicles for religious experience which predominate today, especially the so-called fundamentalisms of Christianity and Islam, attract the dispossessed masses; they offer a means of connecting with world society, but they do not yet influence the institutions which rule that society. And it would be tragic if they did, since they look backwards to the certainty of religions of the Book at a time when humanity's means of communication are fast moving in a new direction.

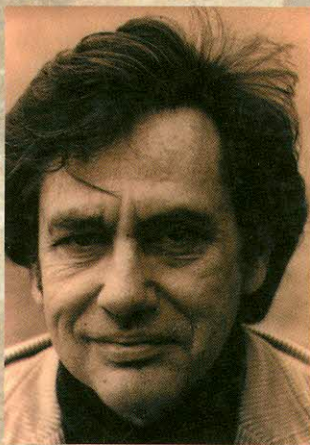
Roy Rappaport does not engage at length with what many take to be religion's most distinctive and alarming feature, namely its capacity to fuel divisive conflicts. Instead, he focuses on the potentially constructive powers of ritual. For, as I stated at the beginning, he intends his book to be a sort of manual for those who would collaborate in the task of remaking religious life along lines compatible with the enhancement of life on this planet. It may or may not turn out to be that. What he has assembled here, however, deserves at the very least to set the anthropology of ritual and religion on a new course.

Emile Durkheim's dualistic conception of the religious life as a bridge between separate worlds, the sacred and the profane, the collective and the individual, reflected his assumption that society would continue to be defined by the impersonal institutions of the state and a market-driven division of labour. In such a world, the personal and the everyday have no meaningful connection with society and history; so that it is left to experts, sociologists and anthropologists, to discover how the abstract principles by which we live are reproduced in religious ritual. Rappaport's approach is strikingly different. His definition of ritual draws no hard line between the sacred and the everyday, between society and the individual or, for that matter, between culture and nature. And this reflects the changed circumstances of our late twentieth-century world, where faith in anonymous structures has taken something of a beating in recent years.

Rappaport's vision of the human universals appropriate to our day invites us to rethink the modernist movement which launched our century and has sustained the universities as a privileged enclave within it. In particular he insists that we find ways of reconciling science and religion, since their mutual antagonism is ruinous and their false synthesis, as in that latterday astrology, economics, is potentially even more so. The vast majority of his professional colleagues will probably be unmoved by his arguments, since they have long been committed to other ways of thinking and have too much at stake in the existing institutions. But, if there is to be a future for specialized intellectual enquiry, young anthropologists and other students of religion will be stimulated by Roy Rappaport's bold example to explore new regions of human possibility.

Keith Hart
Cambridge
April 1997

Roy Rappaport argues that religion is central to the continuing evolution of life, although it has been displaced from its original position of intellectual authority by the rise of modern science. His book, which could be construed as in some degree religious as well as about religion, insists that religion can and must be reconciled with science. Combining adaptive and cognitive approaches to the study of humankind, he mounts a comprehensive analysis of religion's evolutionary significance, seeing it as co-extensive with the invention of language and hence of culture as we know it. At the same time he assembles the fullest study yet of religion's main component, ritual, which constructs the conceptions which we take to be religious and has been central in the making of humanity's adaptation. The text amounts to a manual for effective ritual, illustrated by examples drawn from anthropology, history, philosophy, comparative religion and elsewhere.



Roy Rappaport taught at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor from 1965 until his death in 1997. He was President of the American Anthropological Association from 1987 to 1989. Among his many publications are *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968; revised edition 1984) and *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (1979).

Cover illustration: Rock painting from the Drakensberg Range, South Africa.

"Once in a great while there appears a book that alters the dimensions of the intellectual field to which it speaks. This is such a book. In it, the author marshalls insights drawn from ethnography and ecology, the cybernetics of communication, comparative religion and semiotics to establish the centrality of ritual for what it means to be human. In clear and elegant prose, Roy Rappaport calls into question many of the ways we think about the world. The result is an intellectual adventure of the first magnitude."

Eric Wolf

"Roy Rappaport's book is an admirable blend of rich information and analytical power. It is a committed and challenging reflection on the importance of religion and the constructive power of rituals for a postmodern world, seen in the light of its pre-modern and modern history. A courageous work in a period of overspecialized scholarship, I have never read such a comprehensive and penetrating treatise on rituals."

Hans Küng, Universität Tübingen

"A profound and brilliant work that combines sustained deductive reasoning with a global, holistic vision. It explores the nature of ritual, its relationship to language, truth, and experience, its consequences for moral and social order, and its significance for understanding the place of humanity in nature. As a fine grained, incisive, yet epistemologically complex and generous analysis, this is quite simply the most original and important social scientific investigation into the foundations of religion since Durkheim."

Michael Lambek, University of Toronto

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