

INITIATION AND RITES OF PASSAGE

Peter Prevos*

6 February 2001

1 Introduction

A ritual can be defined as a traditional and ordered sequence of communal actions in which a sacred purpose is achieved by means of an inter-play between the sacred and the mundane world.¹ Moore and Habel define seven types of ritual, stretching over all aspects of life. In this brief study I will focus on initiation rituals and *rites of passage*.

2 Initiation Rituals

A rite of passage is according to Moore and Habel a Ritual action by means of which the initiate is 'separated' from one 'world' and taken into another.² Rites of passage are performed on special occasions and mainly deal with entering a new stage of life. Many cultures perform birth rituals, puberty rituals, marriage rituals and death rituals; In the Catholic Church for example these turning points in life are celebrated with Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony and the Extreme Unction.

Besides initiation rituals to demarcate stages of life, there are also initiation rituals for special occasions, such as a coronation, ordination of a priest, membership to a (secret) society or the initiation of the shaman.

*Originally written for the Open Learning Australia course *Myth, Ritual & the Sacred*.

¹B. Moore and N. Habel, *On religion related to education*, (Adelaide: SACAE, 1982), p. 204.

²Ibid.

3 Rites of Passage

Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), a French anthropologist, born in Germany with a Dutch father, is famous for his study on rites of passage. In his book *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). Van Gennep argues in this book that rites of passage comprise of three ritual stages; the so called tripartite structure: *séparation*, *marge*, and *agrégation* (separation, transition, and reincorporation), or preliminal, liminal, and postliminal stages (before, at, and past the threshold).

3.1 Separation

In these rites the initiate will be symbolically—and in many cultures physically—removed from the world to which they have belonged. Separation rites often involve symbolic actions as removing clothing or removing parts of the body.³ After the rite of separation the initiate is in what van Gennep calls the liminal world, a social and religious nowhere land. The word liminal is derived from the Latin *limin* (threshold).

3.2 Transition

During the performance of these rites, the person is in the liminal world, between old and new states. During this stage, the initiate gets instructed in the responsibilities of the new role. Transition rites express the liminal condition of the candidates. In this condition they are often considered to be in danger themselves, or a danger to others. To mitigate this negative influence, they are provided with a sponsor whose role it is to protect the candidates.⁴

3.3 Reincorporation

In the final step of the tripartite, the initiate is confirmed in his or her new status, the initiate crossed the threshold so to speak. These rites may include spiting on the new member, or investing the candidate with new clothes, rings, tattoos etcetera.⁵ These marks of identity publicly announce that the individual belongs to the new group or status.

³Normal Habel, Michael O'Donoghue, and Marion Maddox, *Myth, ritual and the sacred. Introducing the phenomena of religion*, (Underdale: University of South Australia, 1993).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

4 Religious Meaning of Initiation

Rites of passage have multi-layered meanings. The meaning and intent of the ritual can be social or psychological as well as spiritual or religious. Certain rites of passage represent first and foremost transformations in the religious status or circumstances of the initiated. The earlier mentioned Catholic initiation rituals have primarily a religious meaning. The Catholic Encyclopedia describes the religious meaning of these rituals or sacraments as follows:

“By Baptism we are born again, Confirmation makes us strong, perfect Christians and soldiers [...] Matrimony, primarily affects man as a social being, and sanctifies him in the fulfillment of his duties towards the Church and society. Extreme Unction removes the last remnant of human frailty, and prepares the soul for eternal life”.⁶

For the Catholic, these rituals are an inseparable part of religious life, one can not be a Catholic if these rituals are not performed.

Eliade argues that the meaning of initiation is always religious because the change of existential status in the novice is produced by a religious experience.⁷ The ceremonies were in primal cultures founded by the divine beings or mythical ancestors. The Council of Trent defined that the above mentioned Catholic sacraments were instituted by Christ.

5 Discussion

Some scholars, like Robert Brain stress the psychological importance of rites of passage. According to the psychological approach, all people have a psychic need to have the support of ritual at transitions in their lives. Brain asserts that western societies do not have initiation at puberty, instead of ritual, we have disturbed teenagers and infantile adults. At the age of eighteen teenagers are magically converted into adults.⁸ Brain is, however, wrong in assuming that western culture does not have any rites of passage. Besides the religious rites of passage—such as practised in the Catholic Church—there are numerous examples rites of passage in

⁶D.J. Kennedy, ‘The Sacraments’, in: *Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New Advent, 2001) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295/>.

⁷Mircea Eliade, *Rites and symbols of initiation: the mysteries of birth and rebirth*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

⁸Robert Brain, ‘Passage to adulthood’, in: *Rites black and white*, (Penguin, 1979).

secular western culture. The rites may be less ceremonial and without the intent of actually being an initiation, but the psychological drive is still apparent. Examples of secular rites of passage are birthdays—especially the 21st—marriages and also funerals. The most apparent difference between the secular rituals and examples from other cultures is the intent of the activity.

Secular initiations are not formalised and participation is voluntary. In post-modern western society one can choose to marry or choose to be buried formally. In many other societies, one is not fully or properly a human being until he has undergone the rites of passage appropriate for his age and sex. For these people there is no choice to participate in the ritual or not. Studying at a university is in a certain way a three or four year initiation to eventually become a member of the academic community. The Rites of Separation are usually conducted at the opening of the academic year. Some universities perform very traditional and formal ceremonies for this purpose. The candidates are placed in a liminal state; they are not yet part of the academic community, they are students. The actual studying can be referred to as the Rite of Transition. It is during this stage that the student consumes the knowledge presented by the 'elders'. The final graduation ceremony is the Rite of Incorporation. The student is through this ritual accepted as a member of the academic community.

References

- Brain, Robert, 'Passage to adulthood', in: *Rites black and white*, (Penguin, 1979).
- Eliade, Mircea, *Rites and symbols of initiation: the mysteries of birth and rebirth*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), Originally published in 1958.
- Habel, Normal, O'Donoghue, Michael, and Maddox, Marion, *Myth, ritual and the sacred. Introducing the phenomena of religion*, (Underdale: University of South Australia, 1993).
- Kennedy, D.J., 'The Sacraments', in: *Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New Advent, 2001) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295/>, Originally published in 1912.
- Moore, B. and Habel, N., *On religion related to education*, (Adelaide: SACAE, 1982).