Ritual is Not Religion: Exploring Balagangadhara's Proposal for Understanding the "East"

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Introduction

By now, most of us are probably aware of Daniel Dubuisson, Timothy Fitzgerald and Richard King's critique of religion as a (western) ideological and constructed concept.[1] In view of their arguments, scholars are usually urged to take one of three options: reject religion as a useful category for cross-cultural discourse; side with Ivan Strenski who continues to engage with the reality of religion;[2] or adopt a more playful stance alongside Russell McCutcheon, for whom 'religion' is a second-order activity constructed for and by academia.[3] S. N. Balagangadhara's argument, however, offers an alternative.

S. N. Balagangadhara is an Indian scholar, the current director of the Comparative Science of Cultures Research Centre in Ghent University, Belgium. In his seminal work, *"The Heathen In His Blindness…": Asia, The West and The Dynamic Of Religion*, he is critical of the concept of universal religion, the idea that religion exists in all cultures.[4] Yet unlike Fitzgerald or King, who call for the complete discarding of 'religion', Balagangadhara

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1. For instance, see Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion : Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*. trans. William Sayers (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the 'Mystic East'*. (London: Routledge, 1999).

2. Ivan Strenski, "On 'Religion' and Its Despisers" in Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson ed, *What is religion? Origins, Definitions and Explanations*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), 113–132.

3. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

4. S. N. Balagangadhara, *'The Heathen in His Blindness…': Asia, The West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

argues that religion does 'exist' in some cultures. He means this in a very specific sense that begs explanation. Balagangadhara's assertion is that in western culture, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are religions. In contrast, other cultures, particularly in the East like India, have something else called ritual.

Within religious studies it is commonly believed that ritual exists as a sub-category of religion.[5] Rituals are thought to be important primarily because they are given meaning by a larger religious structure. This ideology dominates the way rituals are studied across academic departments.[6] Alternative theories exist, Staal's work on the meaninglessness of rituals among them.[7] Despite this, common practice proposes religion as the supra-category containing ritual as an element or aspect.[8] This way of thinking is further complicated by the addition of myth, whereby myth and ritual are understood as components comprising religion.[9]

Balagangadhara, in contrast, argues for a separation between ritual and religion. For a long time, he asserts, the West believed that the sphere of religion was part of a God-given legacy to all humankind. This idea was fueled with the presupposition that there was a God-shaped vacuum, or even a religious sensibility, inside all humanity. It was with this presupposition that the West met non-western cultures. When entering eastern cultures, despite the fact that the culture was so different from their own, and because of their pre-conceived notions that religion was universal, they did not do

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5. While there is an acceptance of 'secular' rituals, social rituals and even rituals within the animal kingdom, the idea that rituals are part of a larger religious framework is still taken for granted by Religious Studies departments.

6. For instance, Bharati surveys the anthropological study of religion and where religion contains belief systems and rituals and invariably the rituals have religious meaning. Agehananda Bharati, "Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion: Ritual and Belief Systems." *Biennial Review of Anthropology* Vol. 7 (1971): 230–282.

7. Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual" *Numen* 26/1 (June 1979): 2–22.

8. For instance Rappaport, notes that while "all ritual is not religious, not all religious acts are ritual," ritual is the "ground from which religion grows." Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 26–27. See also essays in Daniel de Coppet ed., *Understanding Rituals* (London: Routledge, 1992) that suggest a strong link between religion and ritual as well as ritual and meaning.

9. Robert A. Segal, "The Myth-Ritualist Theory of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19/2 (June 1980): 173–185 and Robert A. Segal, *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology.* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

any research or gather empirical data about *whether* religion existed in that culture or not. Instead, they set out to 'discover' what *kind* of religion existed. The subsequent 'religion' that emerged was thoroughly coloured by western (theological) postulations of what religion was. In effect, the world of religion labelled things as "religion" which were not "religion".[10] In other words, "y" came to "x" and made "x" look like a "y" (wherein the "y" refers to religion, and "x" to the practices of eastern cultures).

But was that which was found in other cultures any different from religion? The conception of religion, as it applies to the Semitic religion, Balagangadhara argues, does not apply to what is found in the Asian East, especially in India. What he instead proposes is that India can be best understood, by those within the "religion" framework, as "ritual".

My intention is to draw attention to the significance of Balagangadhara's thesis for the study of ritual, especially in light of religious studies. I intend to demonstrate that if we accept that different cultures operate differently, then the dichotomy between myth and ritual, often seen within the spectre of religious studies, can be reoriented to now equate "religion as myth" and "ritual as ritual". It is in this sense ultimately that ritual is no longer "religion".

What is Religion?

Before attempting any re-definitions however, we must heed Balagangadhara's methodological (re)orientation. When looking at other cultures, Balagangadhara argues we need to have a theory that allows for one culture to be different from another. He illustrates said approach in the following example. A mason and a priest are looking at a castle and a cathedral. To the mason perhaps, the two buildings are more similar than different (in view of the building material and processes used). To the priest, the two buildings are more different than similar (in terms of function or purpose). One's view of the structure is determined by subjective-particularity based on what one has come to know. Hence, often in culture the results are determined by how you approach your object. Looking for

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10. While this argument is reflected throughout his work, this reasoning is found particularly in Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in His Blindness,* 103–142.

either similarities or differences will also influence your perspective to discover them. Balagangadhara admits he is looking for differences.

Progressing in that vein of thought, Balagangadhara defines culture as a "configuration of learning" and differentiates cultures according to divergent "configurations of learnings".[11] A configuration of learning is the "cultural answer to the biological problem of our survival," the way people make their environment habitable; how the people learn to survive and function within the natural and social environment.[12] The configuration of learning is how a culture structures its goings about, it is the cultural knowledge, it is the process of socialization. It is not static. It is in constant flux; and there are dominant and subordinate kinds of learnings in each culture. Yet, a configuration of learning is identifiable and replicable, in that it is also passed on from generation to generation. An example, of a "configuration of learning" includes child-rearing practices, as these differ from culture to culture. While one society tends to encourage quick infant detachment, another society encourages the opposite in delayed infant detachment. These practices are developed over long periods of time, they may change, and even have regional variation, but they are also passed on as a kind of collective learning, through families and schooling (and now the media), across generations.

Thus a "configuration of learning" is more than practices and behaviour. It is, moreover, the way a society produces its knowledge and fundamentally orders its reality. Balagangadhara suggests:

> In the West, a root model of order brings about a configuration of learning. This root model is religion, which configures learning processes by structuring the experience of the world. Typically, this specific way of learning is a "knowing about". It produces a culture-specific knowledge, a species of knowledge, viz. theoretical knowledge, that we call sciences.[13]

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11. Particularly, Balagangadhara asserts that "Specific to each culture is a configuration of learning, where one kind of learning is dominant and the others subordinate. This emphasis entails that one kind of learning to learn (or meta-learning) dominates all other learning process (together with their meta-learning). Consequently, typical to each configuration of learning is a type of learning to learn. This meta-learning depends on the kind of learning dominant in the configuration." Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness*, 400.

12. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness*, 411.

13. Ibid., 400.

This knowing about, a theoretical focus, which dominates western culture, also has a performative (action) aspect but it is subordinate to the theoretical ordering. Western culture orders its reality, its environment, by understanding the world and asking existential and theoretical questions of the environment and of itself. This theoretical focus, or, "knowing about" is how religion is disseminated and is also how reality is apportioned.

Balagangadhara identifies religion as the configuration of learning for the West; Religion is the way the West orders itself. The emphasis on knowing about is expressed best through religion, as wanting to know about the world, the cosmos, and humanity's place within the larger scheme of things.

Balagangadhara defines religions as "an explanatorily intelligible account of the Cosmos and itself."[14] In effect religion not only defines the world, but also itself. This desire to understand, theorize, and ultimately order the chaos, indicate several things about religion to Balagangadhara. First, because religion seeks out beliefs and doctrines, what people believe becomes important (in order to understand or "know about"). So instantiated is this in religion that one's actions, in terms of their meaning or value, are determined by one's belief. Right action, one may say comes from right belief.[15] Second, there is an emphasis on 'text', and especially text as revelation, which becomes the cause/reason for belief as well as the focus of reflection/study/action. Third, there is an emphasis on the meaningfulness of all life, which is expressed through an overarching explanation of history with its emphasis on origins of life as well as the *telos* of life and existence. Fourth, there is an oppositional element to religion, wherein religion defines itself in opposition to the beliefs and meanings of something else (the world, other communities, etc.). Meaning, now, is vitally important and emphasized. This, in turn, leads to, what Balagangadhara sees as, the dynamic of religion—proselytization or, its inverse, secularization.[16] Poignantly, Balagangadhara notes that these are the ideas modern scholars brought with them to study Indian 'religions'. They identified the culture of India in these categories; categories that were, and still are, largely irrelevant.

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14. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness*, 427.

15. Ibid., 262.

16. Again, these points are reflected throughout the book, but particularly represented in Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness*, 243–338.

What is Ritual?

Yet our focus here is on ritual. As a disclaimer, Balagangadhara notes that the attempt to understand another culture from one's own is a "purely hypothetical construction."[17] A western culture looking to understand any another culture will do so in a theoretical way because of its configuration of learning; it is the limits of its knowing. Despite this, Balagangadhara stresses that it is not impossible to attain some sort of positive inter-cultural interaction, as this has been possible in the past and must remain a hope.[18]

Keeping in mind how religion is the root model for the "configuration of learning" of the West, Balagangadhara argues that ritual is the root model for the configuration of learning of the East, especially India. As religion privileged knowing about and explanation, ritual privileges performance and concerns 'how to live'. Performance is the dominant trait in eastern culture and while other properties are valued in this culture, not the least of which is theoretical reflection, yet the communal decree Balagangadhara states, is not in knowing but in doing. In this way, ritual is India's configuration of learning:

> In such a case, a practical or performative learning process will dominate the configuration of learning. As a culturally specific way of learning, it would also evolve and give identity to a culture. Such a culture exists, I would like to suggest, and it is an Asian culture, *viz.* India. Its way of going-about solves the problem of 'how to live' not by building a worldview but by developing among its members *an ability* to try to live the best way they can. That is to say, such is their way of learning that it teaches them *how to live*. This is not done by imparting knowledge *about* the world but by imparting *practical knowledge.*[19]

Using the work of Fritz Staal in this case, Balagangadhara shows how Indian ritual is "meaningless", an "a-intentional, agent-less, and goal-less" action.[20] That is not to say that rituals have no meaning or purpose. Rather, as Balagangadhara indicates, rituals in India are actually an ordering mechanism for culture, a culture is bound together by the practice of it. Yet,

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17. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness*, 412.
18. Balagangadhara does offer a methodology for doing this, but that is not the concern of the present discussion.
19. Ibid., 411.
20. Ibid., 415.

as a configuration of learning, it achieves a social cohesion and survival in India that is distinctly different from how 'religion' functions in the West.

> In a configuration of learning generated by [ritual] performative learning dominates. Learning to *do* rituals is performative; the way in which members of this culture go-about in the world is itself recognizably ritualized.[21]

Yet, from the perspective of the theoretical framework of the West, ritual without meaning is defined stereotypically as mechanical, repetitive, and lacking in content or sense. This makes ritual into a kind of puzzle to be solved. Solutions are determined more often than not, by ascertaining the inner/hidden kernel of meaning and discovering the significance of the ritual. Within the 'solution' there is a need to postulate a "genuine" religious connection between the action and the actor (or community) that is more than the practical goal of communal gathering/ordering.

It is not surprising that this theoretical reflection on ritual often leads to understanding similarities and differences, which result in various comparative/ideological (theological) responses. Scholars looking to draw comparisons between Hindu rituals and Christian rituals are emblematic of this. As Balagangadhara states, these two traditions are entirely different:

> Ritual [in Asia] is not seen as an agent-centred activity. [Yet] The so-called religious 'rituals' [of the West]–like the Catholic mass–are considered important by those who participate in them because of the liturgy. Some actions are allowed because they are textually guided and interpreted. They are better called liturgical actions, not rituals.[22]

In so far as ritual is witnessed within the framework of religion, the emphasis on the under-current meaning and purpose of the ritual is a religious exercise that prefers the theoretical reflection over the performance.

It must be stressed, however, that Balagangadhara is not saying that the West is purely theoretical and the East practical. In fact, both need performatory learnings to function. He is simply highlighting dominant ordering principles at work. The West needs to make sense of things; to explain, to know about. In the East there was no comparable desire for a central or localized clarity. In fact, by and large, the culture practices its

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21. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness,* 411.
22. Ibid., 417.

daily rituals without any desire for cohesion of thought, or even a concern about origins or destinies.

In this way non-religious cultures challenge religious cultures at their most basic. The idea of meaningless action challenges a previously mentioned religious root belief that belief leads to action. This mat find basis in a break in the actor-action relations. This is illustrated through the eastern concept of self, which is vastly different from western reflection of self. In India, a sense of non-self, or a lesser self, implies that action from self is understood differently from the action that relates to the knowing of self in the West. Thus, to experience ritual in the sense the East experiences ritual, the West must envision the "mechanically repetitive" activity as agent-less. It must engender an absence of the experience of self, or agency, or personhood; or adopt the perspective from a weak sense of self at the very least.

Balagangadhara's purpose is to set the foundation for a comparative science of cultures.[23] By showing that religion is a learning configuration that is unique only to some parts of the world, one that is not an organizing principle everywhere else,[24] he is indicating the need for awareness of the presuppositions one brings to a foreign agent or body. Yet our focus here is to see the implications of this idea to the study of ritual and the subsequent engagement with cultures of ritual.

Separating Ritual from Religion: Introducing Myth

Catherine Bell begins her book *Rituals—Perspectives and Dimensions* by showing the historical conflict in the academy between the concepts of myth and ritual.[25] While Balagangadhara does not use the language of myth, it is not hard to see that if we broadly define myth as a narrative

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23. For instance, some important concerns for Balagangadhara are "how could we ever describe the other? How could one ever break out of one's conceptual framework to describe the 'otherness' of the other? Could one describe the other without using one's own categories?" Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness,* 454.

24. Balagangadhara says the same thing about 'worldviews' which to him have the same theological presuppositions as religions, and thus are the part of the same learning configuration of the 'West'.

25. Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

held by a community that has explanatory and communal power,[26] or any such meaning making exercise, then perhaps through Balagangadhara a possible reforming of myth is possible. If myth is an attempt to explain and understand the world then myth is religion. Ritual, on the other hand, when viewed outside the mythic framework as meaningless activity, is a counter concept to myth.

In this view, ritual and myth are falsely seen as subsidiaries to religious studies. Religion becomes an attitude of looking at the world, possibly expressed through the category of "myth". Ritual, meanwhile is the way other cultures order their worlds, through a predominantly performative emphasis.[27] In contrast, some other cultures do not give meaning-making importance, and in that sense stand in opposition to myth in favour of ritual. Balagangadhara not only points to the differences, but also points to the dangerous assumption one perspective has in thinking that it can rightly describe (or critique) another perspective.

I do not think we need to accept the scope and terminology of Balagangadhara's proposal. I hesitate in continuing with "West" and "East" as entirely useful categories and thus I allow for a limited application of cultural differences where people are different, rather than entire cultures/ethnic groups. This for me allows for psychological identities to play a role in determining how decisions are made. We can possibly argue that individuals or communities within communities exist outside the dichotomies of West and East, and assert that different people deal with their environment differently; with either an emphasis on ritual or myth.

However, I would suggest that it is helpful to view mythic and ritualistic divergences in individuals and communities, outside the realm of religion. We could argue for the performative nature of all myth, in that even talking about ritual, giving meaning and order to reality, as performative, is ritualistic. Yet it is also conceivable that a person within the ritual framework could look at the myth-oriented descriptions and explanations of outsiders and find that he or she is entirely misunderstood.

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26. For instance see Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4–5.
27. Lodewijk Van Oord, "Culture as a configuration of learning," *Journal of Research in International Education* 4/2 (2005): 173–191.

Conclusion

We are left with two views of ritual and I think both are viable, though one is preferable. First, there is religion and the ritual within that religion. This kind of ritual is understood within the rules and purposes of religion, with an emphasis on meaning-making and explanation. Here myth and ritual are seen as subsidiary to religion. Then, there is another kind of ritual. This ritual stands outside religion. Evident through much of India, ritual is how the entire community functions as a culture. This broad-view of ritual seems meaningless and empty, in that there is no emphasis on meaning. Yet, it exists and is successful in holding society together without recourse to an overarching narrative. It is effective because it is practiced. In effect, to this ritual world, and perhaps also to some outside it, religion does not include myth and ritual, but religion is myth while ritual is ritual.

The division between religion and ritual is not a negative exercise. By seeing our own leanings and learning(s) we are put in our proper place. Freeing ritual from religion (or myth) vastly improves our awareness of cross-cultural issues. We are rightly cautioned not to universalize since it is only ever our universe we apply as we extend our understanding. The lesson here is also a warning about the assumption that two people from different cultures are ever doing the same action. Instead the task should be that one thinks through and actually *appreciates* (if this is in fact one's "religious/ mythic" aim) the difference.