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# Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice



## Synopsis

Ritual studies today figures as a central element of religious discourse for many scholars around the world. Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, Catherine Bell's sweeping and seminal work on the subject, helped legitimize the field. In this volume, Bell re-examines the issues, methods, and ramifications of our interest in ritual by concentrating on anthropology, sociology, and the history of religions. Now with a new foreword by Diane Jonte-Pace, Bell's work is a must-read for understanding the evolution of the field of ritual studies and its current state.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Throws down the gauntlet to cultural interpretations of ritual....Bell's erudition and command of the literature, especially in the field of anthropology, is most impressive. Her appeal for the centrality of dynamic individuals, strategies, and power relationships is powerful and will no doubt strike a chord among those similarly disaffected with prevailing trends in understanding ritual. \* American Journal of Sociology \*

Late Professor Emerita of Religious Studies, Santa Clara University

Some people lack the humility to recognize that just because they fail to understand a book does not mean that the book is not understandable. More's the pity that on these pages they can trash it with impunity. This pearl deserves a beaming five stars any day, rather than the one given to it by

several of those it has, in the democratic market place, found itself cast before. Ritual might be described as the "rocket science" of the humanities, and anyone who has seriously looked into the subject knows that Catherine Bell's studies on it are not only brilliant, but indispensable. This is no less so because she has not attempted to dumb-down a demanding subject that has brought many brilliant minds to theoretical loggerheads. No, this book is not for the person who wants to walk away with an easy thumbnail definition of ritual. (So if you want a primer on the subject that simplifies it for you, or if you are looking for a "how to" book on ritual, this book isn't for you.) Yes, this book is a highly serious and learned theoretical contemplation on the subject of ritual in all its complexity. No one has thought more about ritual, or about what other people have thought about ritual, than Bell. The serious student of the subject is deeply in her debt, as major figures in the field of ritual studies readily acknowledge. If you want the clear-headed and nuanced opinion of a brilliant woman who read most everything there is to read on the subject (from the perspective of social theory, that is), then you'll cherish this book as much as I do. Especially if you have read her other major work on the subject (*Ritual*), this book is a knockout. In the prior work, which is more of a survey of current thinking on the subject, Bell describes the history of, and major figures in, the field of ritual studies. In this book she presents her own position on why ritual has proven so difficult to analyze and agree upon. In short, she argues (effectively) that ritual cannot be understood without appreciating its peculiar resonance within the broader social/cultural spheres wherein it is performed. She suggests that the term "ritualization" is better than "ritual" at indicating the complex and dynamic efficacy of ritual practice. Whereas "ritual" seems to suggest that a rite can be readily lifted out of its social context and examined, "ritualization" invites a simultaneous examination of the culture wherein the rite is performed. It also invites a consideration of the varied effects of ritual within ritual cultures. Bell notes that rather than achieving a simple social unity or harmony (as is naively assumed), ritual produces a complex and seemingly contradictory variety of responses to itself, responses which nevertheless serve to structure ritual societies, if in a far more multifarious manner than has usually been recognized. Ritual does not so much produce consensus, then, as compliance. This distinction becomes particularly illuminating when we think of ritual's fundamental relationship (historically and anthropologically) to power. Ritual works not so much by getting people to agree about its nature, meaning, or function; rather, it works by getting them to disagree with one another in strategically complimentary ways, and by privileging certain forms of disagreement over others. This implies a great deal about the nature and subtlety of ritual's (as well as power's) effectiveness, and about how the ritual process may be most potent among those who are inclined, for instance, to doubt its very existence. In the contemplation of ritual, then, it is as though we happen across a certain border of

human perceptivity, behind which lies something singularly profound (however unsuspected) about ourselves. Bell is entirely too insightful and tenacious a thinker to slight that momentous intimation, especially as it edges most nearly into view only under the sustained critical attention which she has afforded her subject. Read with patience, Bell's works on ritual are (appropriately enough, considering the subject matter) a revelation. Whatever the efforts of some to belittle them, they comprise an unsurpassed academic meditation on a most austere issue.

As a PhD student studying rituals, this is my main reference book. Bell not only provides all the relevant ritual theories from many prominent scholars, she also extends this theory with her practice approach. It is this approach which gives me, as a reader, a better grasp on the concept of ritual; a term which remains very difficult to define. Namely, she shifts the focus from ritual as a concept to ritual as a practice; as something that actors do (i.e. ritualization rather than ritual). I also very much appreciate her critical and in-depth perspective which considers power, strategy and politics involved in ritualization. Overall, I recommend this book to all who are interested in developing their understanding and gaining a more critical perspective of both ritual theory and ritual practice, just as the title suggests.

This book, while fairly well written and sufficient for what it is, did not provide the information I was seeking. This is not to be construed as a negative review of the book, however. As always, it was delivered when promised and there were no problems with the purchase and receipt of items process.

This book is definitely not a light read. Most of the work is highly theoretical with few real world applications; the author is essentially summarizing most of the major scholarly arguments in the field of ritual studies. Anyone who like me isn't fascinated by the intricate deconstruction of ideas will find this book a chore. Even so, as a novice of ritual theory I found it useful to see the pros and cons of each argument.

First of all, a little word of warning: As seems to be generally agreed, Bell's writing style is more than a little dense, and while she in some sense introduces ritual theory, she really assumes you already know a great deal about it. Consequently, the book is simply not approachable unless you have already read most of the works to which she refers. If you've been assigned this for an undergrad class, or a beginning grad class, you have been cheated. Professors, please, don't assign this until

people have already read Smith, Levi-Strauss, Durkheim, Frazer, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Geertz, Ortner, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Turner, Grimes, and probably Derrida for good measure. This is a wonderful book if you know all that stuff; it's truly painful if you don't. I first read this when I started grad school, and I hated it. Couldn't see the point, frankly. Bell's criticisms of various theories seemed worthwhile, but as she doesn't really propose a new method in the end, what's the point? So I dropped it happily for a long time. Then I came back to it, almost ten years later, because I found myself delving very deeply into ritual theory, its history, and its future. Suddenly I saw what Bell is up to, and realized that this thing stands as one of the single most important contributions to the field. Now how can both be true? Well, here's the short, grossly-simplified version. First, Bell argues that pretty much all current ritual theory tends to cleave along a fault-line: thought/action is the usual form. That is, people DO ritual, and THINK something else. She then turns to a deconstructive approach, and demonstrates that this is logically nonfunctional. She's right, by the way. Whatever you think of the rest of the book, this argument (about the first quarter of the book) leaves smoking rubble where the vast majority of ritual theory used to be. Next, she picks up the notion of "practice," as formulated by Sherry Ortner, Michel de Certeau, and Pierre Bourdieu, and argues that ritual is a mode of practice, and thus continuous with other modes of behavior within everyday life. BUT, you see, one of the oddities of ritual is precisely that it usually is understood by the people doing it as NOT continuous. This, she argues, is one of the defining factors of ritual as a specific mode of practice: the practice of "ritualization" largely depends on the construction of a division between ritual and other behaviors, within the culture in question. Armed with that as a structure, she goes and proposes a new way of looking at ritualization, rather than ritual; that is, she wants to look at the way people ritualize rather than the product of their constructive process. Personally, I suspect that this shift to ritualization drags us right back into action rather than thought, precisely the thing she wanted to get out of, but the way she does this is very, very slick. Now here's the \$64,000 question. Did you understand, or care about, almost any of what I just wrote? If yes to both, you're going to love this book (or hate it, but enjoy the process). If no to either or both, don't read this. Once again, would people stop assigning this book to those not prepared to address it intelligently? It's simply not fair, and you should be using the time on something more useful and approachable.

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