

The rite stuff

By [Don Kraybill](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Interaction Ritual Chains

Randall Collins

Princeton University Press

A recent Sunday worship service moved me to tears. Despite being an analytical sociologist committed to rational descriptions of human behavior, my eyes welled

up. Our pastor invited parishioners desiring to be healed to come forward and be anointed with three drops of oil on the forehead. As the congregation sang several verses of a hymn, about two dozen people came forward for the healing oil that was applied by two pastors and two deacons. They came for healing from anxiety before surgery, for forgiveness for broken relationships, for wholeness after divorce, for peace in the face of major decisions. There was no coercion, just a warm invitation and the melodious chords of a congregational hymn, yet they came. As they did, I sat and cried. And as I write these lines my eyes fill with tears again, evoked by the memories of that morning. Why do I cry?

Randall Collins would say that I was captured by the collective effervescence of a good ritual. I was moved by the social contagion, the collective sentiments, and the sounds of the hymn. I got caught up in the mood that surrounded me on that Sunday morning. It was a deeply satisfying moment, despite its somber mood, because it was filled with sacred meanings. People around me who were burdened with pain went forward, seeking comfort and blessing. Even benchwarmers like me had their hearts warmed by the beauty and sacred transcendence that enshrouded the moment.

In Collins's scheme the anointing service was a formal ritual because it was planned in advance; yet its outcome was uncertain. Would anyone come forward? It could have been a huge embarrassment if no one or only one or two came forward for a dab of oil from the four elders waiting with full vials. Amid my tears, I was relieved, indeed overjoyed that many came forward. Why did I care? The congregation was my group and I wanted our ritual to succeed—to heal and empower those in pain.

The oil was the sacred symbol that focused our attention. Our pastor never proclaimed that it would heal anyone, but the oil was powerful; it moved some to walk and others to cry. And as a good ritual it had spillover power. It created memories that propelled the spiritual vigor of the congregation for several weeks as members talked about it in committee meetings and sidewalk conversations. Some members urged the pastor to include the anointing again, and on a regular basis because it generated so much solidarity, such a good sense of community. But others worried that if we did it too often it would lose its efficacy, its sense of mystery.

Collins, professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, argues in this pathbreaking book that ritual—whether in face-to-face conversations or at national

presidential funerals—is the key sociological factor that ties group structure and collective beliefs together. In many ways this is an old mantra proclaimed by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim and later by the American sociologist Erving Goffman, who underscored the power of ritual to create sacred symbols to pump up groups with collective solidarity. Sociologists often splinter into two sectors—the structuralists, who analyze macro structures with highly sophisticated statistical techniques, and the culturalists, who use qualitative methods to study values and norms in small-group settings. Ritual is often lost in this divide and left to the anthropologists who study small exotic communities or the ritual studies scholars who focus on formal religious ceremonies.

Collins plows new ground in several ways. First, he argues that ritual is the central category for all sociological analysis because ritual connects and mediates group structure and beliefs. Consider the orchestra as a metaphor for large-scale societies or small Bible study groups. The players arrange themselves in a particular pattern—a structure that is essential to making music—on the stage. Knowledge of notes and scores fills their minds, but there is no music, only silence. The movement of the director's baton ignites the ritual and the energy begins to flow. Structure and beliefs, blended together by ritual, unite to produce lovely music. From sexual intercourse to congressional debates, from worship services to military campaigns, it is ritual, according to Collins, that mobilizes collective energy which fortifies group solidarity, constructs symbols, and sets groups boundaries through processes of exclusion.

Second, his work breaks new paths because it proposes a comprehensive theory of ritual grounded in everyday situations. It is an argument about the power of situations and contexts to define and shape social life. He calls it a radical micro-sociology because it rests in the structure and meaning of social encounters on the micro level. The principles ferreted out of the micro setting can be applied to macro issues such as social stratification and conflict at the societal or even global level.

Showing the wide application of ritual theory, Collins demonstrates how ritual can interpret social behavior from sexual intercourse to the gun control movement to the decline of smoking in America. Collins's theory applies not only to formal celebrations, festivals and religious ceremonies but also to what he calls "natural rituals"—conversations and unplanned encounters.

Finally, Collins bushwhacks new paths when he emphasizes the importance of the emotional energy, what he calls “collective effervescence,” that is generated by ritual. Emotions typically fall within the purview of psychologists—and clinical ones at that—not of “scientific” sociologists who seek to measure group behavior by objective methods. In recent years a small cadre of sociologists have explored the sociology of emotions. Collins ramps up their status by making emotions a central component of the mystery created by ritual. Traditional sociologists who view emotions and face-to-face interaction as largely irrelevant will likely seek to rebut *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

Collins pays scant attention to specific religious ritual because he is writing for theorists who often regard religion as a residue of pre- Enlightenment days. Nevertheless, his theory, pregnant with implications for all dimensions of religious life, can be summed up in four words: Pay attention to ritual. Indeed, it is the core of religious life. Collins would likely contend that ritual will take care of itself. It will always be present because it is central not only to religious experience, but to social life itself.

There are few practical tips in this tome for pastors, but the theoretical insights have many potential applications for religious life. Thoughtful religious leaders can infuse ritual with deep meaning. They can enhance and polish it to produce commitment and action. By paying attention to how they create mystery through ritual, pastors can generate group cohesion and a keen sense of the sacred. Indeed, they can even make sociologists cry. Ritual in the hands of the wrong people can of course be abused and used in malicious ways. Collins reminds us that ritual is a powerful tool that religious leaders should handle with care.