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RITUAL AS WAR:
ON THE NEED TO
DE-WESTERNISE THE CONCEPT[*]

Ritual is habitually seen as repetitive religious behavior solidifying the society or congregation in which it is celebrated. These qualifications are valid for most, but not for all, rituals. Rituals may also be secular events. They may also be constructed for one particular occasion and purpose only. And they may be a way of exploding a society and of waging war upon one's enemies. It has taken Western scholars of religions a long time to discover these secular, non-repetitive, explosive rituals, for the modern Western Christian notion of ritual as religious cult solidifying society has thoroughly constrained the perspectives of Western scholars on, and their approaches to, the rituals, religious and secular, of humankind. As an analytical category in 'Science of Religions',[1] it must, therefore, be 'de-Westernised', if it is serve as an adequate tool for research into the generality of the ritual behaviour of humankind, both religious and secular.

The structure of this contribution is as follows. I first discuss the root cause why we need to de-westernize ritual and the other core concepts of *Religionswissenschaft*. I introduce my argument with an example from the study of the indigenous religions of Africa. Secondly, I suggest that we need to develop an ethological science of religions with ritual as its pivotal notion. Thirdly, I survey three shifts in ritual theory. The first is that from an exclusive definition – ritual being tied exclusively to religion – to an inclusive one: the category of 'ritual' comprising 'ritualizing' communicative behaviour of both religious and secular kinds. The second shift is that from Émile Durkheim's theory of ritual as solidifying society to that of Catherine Bell of ritual [**244**] as 'redemptive hegemony', i.e., as maintaining its 'order' by being full of well-hidden violence. And the third is by noting that ritual may solidify society not only by hiding its violent face, but also by being openly violent, aggressive and destructive of society. I demonstrate the latter from a series of politico-religious rituals in India between 1984 and 1992, which were all aimed at 'liberating the god Rama from his Muslim jail'. Their apotheosis

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[1] In Dutch: *godsdienstwetenschap* (Science of Religion[s]), in English: 'the [academic] Study of Religion[s]'. I am using *Religionswissenschaft* throughout this article, because I delivered this address in a German university.

was the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992. I conclude my contribution with the suggestion that violent rituals may be detected in all religions as a perennial and endemic part of them.

WHY DE-WESTERNISE?

'Immortality' as death briefly delayed

On being invited to lecture in Heidelberg University, I was thrilled to find that some of my articles on 'ritual'[2] were being studied in this university. To discover that one is being read in a foreign university, and to be invited to speak *viva voce* on it, is quite a thrill for me as a scholar of religions and rituals. It made me briefly feel as if I had attained a measure of academic immortality. Briefly, for my study of the indigenous religions of Africa over the past thirty-five years quickly deflated this feeling, for in the religion of the Akan of Ghana – the one I know best[3] – 'immortality' is merely attenuated mortality, death briefly delayed. Mbiti correctly termed the ancestors the 'living dead' (Mbiti 1969: 25–27, passim). In many African traditional religions, ancestors are objects of frequent cult, because they are believed to play a prominent role in the lives of their descendants. However, they are not immortal in a Western-Christian meaning of the concept, for African traditional religions know no steady states in afterlife, such as heaven and hell. In Akan traditional religion – and I suggest, *pace* Mbiti, in African indigenous religions generally –, ancestors do not individually occupy a permanent 'ontological state between God and men' (Mbiti 1969: 27). They survive death for a few generations only, as long as they are ritually remembered by name by their descendants. After that, they slip into the nameless collective of 'the ancestors' (the *nananom* of Akan prayers), and thence into total oblivion. Thus die immortals, quietly, without anyone mourning them. African ancestors are, therefore, not 'immortal'. Their occupying a permanent 'ontological state between God and men' (Mbiti 1969: 27) is an ameliorative Christian theological [**245**] construct, one of the several 'Hellenizations', against which Okot p'Bitek directed his furious protests.[4]

The root cause

This brings me to the subject of this lecture, as it is phrased in its subtitle: 'the need to de-westernize the concept' of 'ritual,' as well as all other core concepts of *Religionswissenschaft*. It brings me to the root cause of the problem confronting us. It is the gap between the aims of *Religionswissenschaft*, and the methods scholars have at their disposal to achieve them. This predicament is most likely the most fundamental problem confronting them.

The primary aim of *Religionswissenschaft* is to gain 'objective' knowledge of the religions of humankind by a 'cool, sober, and methodical'[5] study of them, historical as well as comparative, in order to gain representations of them that are not only unbiased, non-normative, and neutral, but also accurate and empirical, i.e., testable. The latter requires that these representations be presented in such way that fellow scholars may verify or falsify them by re-examining them in a critical spirit of 'organized scepticism'.[6] This critical testing by fellow scholars is

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2   Platvoet 1983a; 1985; 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1996a; 1999a; 2000a; 2000b; 2001.
3   See Platvoet 1973; 1979; 1982a: 39–44, 56–68, 84–120, 175–219; 1982b; 1983a; 1984; 1985a; 1985b; 1991; 2000a; 2001.
4   The other is that of dressing up God and the gods of African indigenous religions in 'Hellenic robes' by presenting them as eternal, omniscient and omnipotent. See p'Bitek 1971: 28, 40, 46–47, 49–50, 58–69, 75–76, 80, 85–88, 91, 102, 105, 107–108, 110; see also Westerlund 1985; Hackett 1990; Shaw 1990.
5   Originally, the phrase appeared in p'Bitek's critical review of Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* (p'Bitek 1964a) when he admonished scholars of African religions to 'prefer a cool, sober, methodical and comparative approach' to the unifying, mystifying, and metaphysical one of Tempels. As 'cool, sober and methodical' it became the title of a critical response to that review by Harris (1964), and of p'Bitek's reply (1964b).
6   See the definition of a social-scientific academic discipline as a 'democratic community of organised scepticism' by Köbben (1974: 88).

absolutely necessary, for the means, which scholars of religions have at their disposal for achieving this lofty aim, are far too weak to produce fully neutral knowledge about religions. What is worse, they are inherently too weak. Fully objective knowledge of the religions of humankind cannot even be achieved with the aid of the critical community of the scholars of religions at a given moment as a collective.

The means are the research methods we use in the study of religions. They are informed by our analytical concepts and theories. Anthropologists, who mainly study other societies and religions synchronically, by participant observation, term their analytical tools the *etic* categories. They are the Western concepts anthropologists use as observers and outsiders, first, for understanding 'the native's point of view' (see Geertz 1999), and then for ordering their data into a description of another culture or religion, for analysing it, for comparing it with other cultures or religions, and for developing theory about them. They term the cultures and religions they study the *emic* meaning systems of the particular actors whose behaviour they observe. As insiders,[7] [**246**] these actors express their views through the symbol and meaning systems of their own cultures.

We may transpose this *etic-emic*/observer-actor/outsider-insider distinction[8] from anthropology to *Religionswissenschaft*, for both are immense enterprises in transcultural hermeneutics. Both aim to represent objectively and neutrally the symbol and meaning systems, cultic behaviour, cosmologies, and the social and religious institutions of other societies and/or other periods. That task requires that we use neutral, unbiased, purely technical categories in their analysis which do not impose upon them, or secretly import into them, our own culturally specific notions, attitudes, sentiments, values, ideals, cosmology, etc. Nor should they constrain our grasp of the non-Western meaning systems we study, and cause us to fail to perceive their full historical, idiosyncratic particularities.

But this is precisely what our *etic*, Western-analytical concepts do. The reason for this sorry state of affairs is, of course, that our *etic* concepts are our own *emic* concepts. They are the historically contingent and culturally particular concepts of modern Western society as shaped by its peculiar Christian history. They are not at all the empty, unbiased, non-directive, purely technical concepts that are fit for the neutral comparative study of religions. On the contrary, they are culturally conditioned, and thus eminently subjective, and defective and inherently flawed for the neutral analysis and comparison of the religions of the world.

Unfortunately, they are the only means at our disposal. They are the only eyes we have for looking at other cultures and religions, and the only spotlights we can direct upon them. Moreover, our minds are so thoroughly steeped in our own culture and its religious traditions, that we take our own perception of other cultures and religions as perfectly 'natural', and our analysis of them as perfectly 'normal'. Our own culture – as the *forma informans* that shaped our minds in even their deepest recesses – is very successful in hiding from us that it imposes constraining and distorting views [**247**] and analyses of other cultures and religions upon us (see Lincoln 1996: 226 [= Lincoln 1999: 397]).

The root-problem of the methodology of *Religionswissenschaft* is, therefore, that so far, we, as scholars of religions, have achieved little in the way of increasing the neutral, *trans-emic* quality of our *etic* categories of description, comparison, and analysis. Nor have we as yet cultivated a strong sense of the need to achieve a higher degree of neutrality for them. To empty them progressively of their modern Western-Christian peculiarities, we need to engage in a

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7   This 'outsider/insider' distinction is different from that other 'outsider/insider problem' which has been a bone of contention in the history of the methodology of *Religionswissenschaft* since its inception and is hotly debated even now. It respects the debate whether scholars, who are not themselves religious, can produce valid knowledge about religions. Those denying that they can, presume that only 'insiders', who are religious themselves, can re-experience by empathy accurately and objectively the full depths of meaning which religious beliefs and actions have for the believers of other religions. For a recent survey of this debate, cf. McCutcheon 1999a.

8   On *emic-etic* see McCutcheon 1999b; Pike 1999; Geertz 1999.

long, painful and never-ending process of self-critical reflection, i.e., in reflexivity, in the meaning of 'us bending-back upon ourselves' in constant critical self-examination. For striving after more neutral concepts, there are two tracks along which we may travel towards a greater *trans-emicity* and neutrality of our *etic* categories.

The oldest one is a constant critical attention to the data supplied to us by the historical study of religions. Despite, or better precisely because of, the pervasively Western character of that discipline, we have been aware that we need to examine them constantly and critically for elements that are discordant with our Western concepts. We must investigate them to find out whether they contain elements that require us to revise our analytical categories. My critique of Mbiti's use of the Western-Christian concept of 'immortality' was based on my historical study of Akan traditional religion. We must be aware of the myopia that our modern Western-Christian *etic* categories cause in us, and widen them with whatever they unduly exclude or fail to accommodate – 'unduly' being of course the crux of the matter, and the bone of contention. Western scholars of other societies, cultures and religions have, however, to some degree of the cultural conditioning of their analytical categories and therefore most often cultivated a spirit of not only cultural, but also of conceptual relativism and been aware of the need to keep our analytical categories constantly open and revisable. At the heart of this ethic – or myth? – of *Religionswissenschaft* as an academic discipline is the relentless strive after 'objectivity.' It implies that its canon of truth is the object of study, the religions that are being studied, and not the categories and theories of the scholars with which they study them. This ethic requires scholars to develop a sharp critical self-reflexivity by a constant awareness of the historical contingency of their analytical categories and the inherent limitations they impose upon their academic work.

If the first road starts from research on the historical data of other religions, the complementary road starts from the opposite end. It consists in the critical examination of the *etic* concepts themselves, as they functioned in *Religionswissenschaft* in the past and now. By means of a thorough study of the history of its methodology, of its core concepts, and of the discipline itself, our core concepts may be stripped of their taken-for-granted pretence of [**248**] providing us with valid, and ostensibly with universally valid, truths. Our *etic* concepts need to be viewed and examined as thoroughly particular, and peculiar, modern Western mental constructs, inspired by very recent Western ideals, interests and conflicts, and as part and parcel of several types of modern Western undercover strategies and open, or more often subtly hidden, hegemonies.[9] This road requires an even more difficult and painful exercise in critical self-reflexivity than the first road, and a greater humility.

One useful exercise along this second road is the study of the shifts in the meaning of the core-concepts of *Religionswissenschaft* in the past. It is the examination of the semantic history by which, e.g., Roman *religio* evolved to modern Western 'religion', *secta* became 'sect', *cultus* changed to 'cult', *mageia* to 'magic', and *superstitio* to 'superstition'. They and such other notions as idols and idolatry, witchcraft and sorcery, paganism, syncretism, etc., should be studied for their polemical, distorting effects. As should also such seemingly innocent categories as 'God', 'soul', 'prayer', 'priest', 'prophet', 'sacrifice', and in particular the modern Western-Christian dichotomies of 'sacred' *versus* 'profane', 'natural' *versus* 'supernatural', 'spiritual' *versus* 'material', etc.[10]

It is important, of course, in this historical semantics, to study, on the one hand, the shifts in their meanings as articulated in the contests over their definition between scholars in the past two centuries.[11] But it is, on the other hand, even more important that their inarticulate shifts

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9   See Chidester 1996 on the intimate link between Western colonization of southern Africa and the development of the core-concepts of *Religionswissenschaft*.

10   For *religio* and 'religion,' and some of the other concepts mentioned, see Platvoet 1999c; Feil 1986; 1997; 1999; Despland 1979; Despland & Vallée 1992. For 'spiritual' *versus* 'material', cf. Platvoet 2004/2010.

11   For an example, cf. Platvoet 2006

are studied, as they occurred in the extra-academic uses and definitions, whether in pious books and fiction, in decisions taken by bureaucrats in government agencies, by judges and lawyers in the courts, by journalists in the media, by teachers in the classroom, or by the general public in its various factions, etc. (see e.g. Beckford 1999; Introvigne 1999; Platvoet 2003). The history of the categories of *Religionswissenschaft* should be studied, moreover, not only in the 'heart lands' of the West – Europe, North America – but also in its colonies, as David Chidester (1996) did for Southern Africa.

Moreover, all these shifts need to be contextualised. That is, the various contexts in which they occurred – political, economical, social, cultural, national, judicial, military, etc. – need to be examined in order to try to determine why the meaning of a concept shifted there and then, in that particular way, by those particular formulators, as part of such and such cultural developments, but also of strategies and power games, local or global.

I have reason to believe that these two roads will deliver the best progress in the de-westernisation of our *etic* concepts if they are seen and walked as a single two-track road. Research in the history of religions should interact [**249**] closely with that of the history and methodology of *Religionswissenschaft*, and of the history of the semantics of its core concepts. This is what I will try to show in the remaining part of this lecture with respect to the concept of 'ritual'.

<center>RITUAL</center>

Towards an Ethology of religion
Apart from the need to de-westernize all analytical concepts of *Religionswissenschaft*, there is a special reason why I urge that we revise the concept of 'ritual'. In my view, research of rituals, and reflection on the concepts we need in their analysis, should become the core business of *Religionswissenschaft*. The history of religions has very much been a philological, text-based discipline until now. Its main business has so far been the examination of the 'sacred' literatures of scriptural religions in order to present their beliefs systematically after the model of Christian theology. It is the cognitive element of religions and the articulate presentation of beliefs that has held the centre stage in *Religionswissenschaft* till now.

One witness for this state of affairs is the massive shift, in the twentieth century, in the definition of 'religion', from the traditional, substantive one of 'religion as communication' with the invisible to the modern, functional one of 'religion as orientation'. One finds the latter as the interpretation of religion as cosmology in anthropology (see e.g. Forde 1954), and as systems of ultimate meaning in modern, Western-Christian Philosophy of Religion and *Religionswissenschaft* (see Platvoet 1990: 189–191; 1994: 704–707).

Another witness is 'the axial age syndrome': most *Religionswissenschaftler* have viewed the scriptural, or world, religions with their canons, literatures, doctrines and theologies as the proper object of the History of Religions theoretically – without texts no history! –, as a result of which they became virtually their sole object of study institutionally. Because preliterate religions[12] have no texts, most scholars of religions regarded them as an uninteresting, if not utterly superstitious fringe to be left to anthropologists. As a result, oral religions – as well as folk religions – have remained virtually unstudied in *Religionswissenschaft*.[13] So have the most recent religions, such as the numerous New Religious Movements and New Age, because they too are hardly doctrinal. All this leaves us with a truncated history of the religions of humankind.[14]

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[12]   They are actually the oldest type of religions of humankind. Their 'histories' recede into the mists of the palaeolithicum. The earliest documentary evidence so far are the remains of a young *homo sapiens sapiens* girl, buried in the 'Border Cave' in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. That grave has been dated at 103.000 years BP ('Before Present'). See Platvoet 1996b: 49n15. This category of religions is also the most numerous and in terms of content and form the most diverse.

[13]   That began to be redressed by Vrijhof & Waardenburg 1979. Cf. also Platvoet 1979.

[14]   For a fuller picture, cf. Platvoet 1993a, 1993b, 1998

[**250**] I do concede that beliefs are an intrinsic part of religions. So, their study will remain indispensable. Yet, I argue that the study of beliefs should cede its place of primacy in *Religionswissenschaft* to the study of rituals, or at least that we need to complement the traditional philological History of Religions with an ethological *Religionswissenschaft* by focusing on religion as behaviour, as *cultus*. We need to study beliefs indirectly, by examining their role in religious rituals.

I define 'cult' as postulated social interaction between believers and the a-empirical addressees which adherents of a religion believe exist. Cult is non-verifiable/non-falsifiable religious communication, for its addressees are invisible beings, realms, powers and qualities, that do not belong to our empirical world in such a way that their existence and activity can be verified or falsified in a testable way before a neutral court of competent scholars (see Platvoet 1990: 192–196; 1994:708–711; 1999b: 262–263). Cult of the a-empirical, however, also constitutes empirical communication, and community, to wit between those attending the ritual.

An ethological *Religionswissenschaft* will modify our views of belief by studying it in the context of cult. Beliefs are mental constructs in the minds of the believers that govern their putative interaction with 'the transcendent.' Ethological research will show that beliefs are normally not at all exclusively cognitive, and are only rarely reflectively articulated in very many religions, particularly preliterate and folk. It will demonstrate that in them beliefs are more often loosely clustered conglomerates of sub-liminal, dense and diffuse notions, sentiments, attitudes, and values in respect of the meta- and infra-empirical realms, persons, or powers that are thought to exist by their believers, and that are believed to affect them and their empirical worlds. It is, therefore, often a huge distortion to articulate the beliefs of these religions and present them in a systematic way, e.g. top-down, from the Creator God to the 'medicines' made from plants, after the model of doctrinal religions.[15]

In addition, it will prove that these beliefs are most often expressed in ritual communication by means of pregnant symbols, that are opaque, multivocal, and polysemous, and hardly ever by precise ones with an unambiguous, well-articulated meaning. By means of these pregnant symbols[16], believers send a [**251**] host of polyphonic phatic messages about their relationships and attitudes to the a-empirical, and to their fellow believers and other empirical addressees. In addition, they may express an emphatic message, e.g. in words, about the business they wish to transact with the 'transcendent' referents, and/or among themselves.[17]

Therefore, I regard 'religion,' 'ritual,' and 'symbol' as the most important concepts in an ethological *Religionswissenschaft*. It will incorporate the preliterate and newest religions as objects of study that are fully equal to doctrinal religions.[18] We need to include them, because this 'fringe' is of the greatest importance, comparatively and theoretically, for these two kinds

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[15] I have been guilty of this distortion myself, when I taught introductory courses on Akan traditional religion. But I was aware of this distortion, and I made my students aware of it, and compensated by presenting them with historical case studies of Akan religious behaviour. For them, see Platvoet 1982a: 84–120; 1982b; 1983a; 1984; 1985a; 1985b; 1991; 2000a; 2001 on Akan ritual behaviour, and Platvoet 1995b; 1999a; 2000b; 2001 on that of the San (or Bushmen).

[16] Victor W. Turner termed them focal, key, dominant, or 'condensation' symbols. He discerned two clusters of referents in them. One fan of meanings sits on the 'orectic' or sensory pole. It expresses, subliminally, desires and feelings of the ritual participants. The other spectrum of *significata* belongs to its ideological or normative pole and represents the norms and values inherent in the social structure of their society. See Turner 1967: 19–32, 50–58; 1968: 1–8, 16–21, 43–44, 80–83, 183–185, 207, 213; 1974: 48–49; Turner & Turner 1978: 243–249; Morris 1987: 241–242.

[17] A ritual needs to be examined by three separate analyses: a network, process and context analysis. In the network analysis, the pre-existing relationships between the participants in the ritual (empirical and postulated) are examined to determine the structure of the community in which the communication, empirical and postulated, takes place. The process analysis examines the flow and the content of ritual. In the context analysis, the several relevant contexts of both the network and the ritual are examined. See Platvoet 1982: 29–34, passim.

[18] For a draft of a General History of Religions 'from Neanderthaler to Now', see Platvoet 1993a; 1993b; 1996b; 1998.

of religions, oldest and newest, are very different in form, content and contexts from the scriptural ones. Both the preliterate and newest religions excel in vague, inarticulate, and confused beliefs, to which no explicit truth claims are attached. In addition, they have a very low visibility, and a near complete lack of institutionalisation. Ethological analysis will uncover also unsuspected dimensions of important unarticulated religiosity in the scriptural religions, such as folk piety, folk religious pragmatics, lay devotion, religious enthusiasm, ritual healing, the exorcism of demons, pilgrimage, etc.

The definition of 'religion' has been fiercely contested throughout the history of *Religionswissenschaft*. Recently, publications have begun to appear on the history of its semantics also (see Despland 1979; Despland & Vallée 1992; Feil 1986; 1997; 1999; Platvoet 1990; 1994; 1999b; 1999c; Platvoet and Molendijk 1999). There is, however, virtually no fight as yet over the definition ritual and symbol in *Religionswissenschaft*, and the study of their semantic histories are as yet fairly virgin fields of research.[19] In anthropology of religions, however, certain developments are under way. Two major shifts in approaches to 'ritual' may be indicated. One is the shift from an exclusive to an inclusive definition of ritual. The other is the development from the [**252**] Durkheimian notion of religion and ritual as solidifying society, to that of Bell of ritual as 'redemptive hegemony.'

Exclusive definitions of 'ritual'
'Ritual' is understood in dictionaries and common parlance as having either a religious denotation, or at least an important religious connotation. In the first case, ritual includes only 'religious rituals,' such as a baptism in church, or a prayer before a meal. In the second case, it refers to public ceremonies with a religious element ranging from minor to major, as e.g. in funerals, marriages, initiations, coronations, etc. In this usage, rituals, as communicative actions,[20] always evince an inner connection with religion and are always defined in religious terms. I term this approach the exclusive definition of ritual. It is standard in *Religionswissenschaft*, witness e.g. the recent (1998) definition of Bernhard Lang in volume 4 of the *Handbuch Religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*:

> Ritual ist Oberbegriff für religiöse Handlungen, die zu bestimmten Gelegenheiten in gleicher Weise vollzogen werden, deren Ablauf durch Tradition oder Vorschrift festgelegt ist, und die aus Gesten, Worten und dem Gebrauch von Gegenständen bestehen mögen.[21]

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[19]   See however Bell 1997: 1–89, for a history of the interpretation of ritual; and Platvoet 2006 for a semantic history of 'ritual' from 1850 to now.

[20]   I am concerned here only with those meanings in the semantic cluster of the concept of 'ritual' that relate to 'ritual' as communicative, or social, behaviour. I do not consider here the one other connotative development in that cluster that refers to repetitive, routine but non-communicative behavior, which have become fixed patterns of behavior in individuals of several kinds. One is that of a daily routine ('My neighbors never skip the ritual of their daily walk along the banks of the river'). Another is of a technological kind, (e.g. 'My mother always goes through the ritual of rinsing the teapot with hot water before she pours the boiling water on the tea'). They may also be of an obsessive kind. Cf. Lang (1998: 453) on the compulsive rituals of persons suffering from a neurosis (e.g. 'Before stepping into bed, he must meticulously straighten his pillow many times to forestall bad dreams'). All non-communicative rituals have in common that no messages are sent in them to empirical or postulated addressees and that they need not be performed, therefore, in front of a 'public', empirical or postulated.

[21]   'Ritual is the general notion for religious acts, which are performed in an identical way at specific occasions, of which the order has been fixed by tradition or prescription, and which may consist in gestures, words and the use of objects' (Lang 1998: 442-443; my translation). Another is by Anonymous (1995: 930): 'The term *ritual* needs a precise definition because of the widespread misuse of the word. Ritual is a system of actions and beliefs that has a beginning, a middle and an end, and is directly related to superhuman beings. Superhuman beings are beings who can do things humans cannot do. […] This definition of ritual excludes such things as routines and habits. […] What makes ritual action unique is the relation it has with superhuman beings. This relationship is usually expressed through the language of belief. It is this relationship that constitutes ritual. Thus ritual is made up of act and belief.' I am grateful to Michael Stausberg for drawing my attention to this

[**253**] And he continues to quote the Roman Catholic Mass, the Jewish circumcision, the Vedic sacrifice, and the recitation of canonical texts by a Buddhist monk as paradigmatic examples of 'rituals.' The origin of this exclusive definition of 'ritual' lies way back in Roman religion in which *ritus* referred to the proper way, approved by tradition, of bringing sacrifices to the gods. And it was reinforced by the way the Latin, Greek and other churches prescribed the content and form of their liturgies (see Lang 1998: 443, 448). Rituals seem to express, and to presuppose the consensus and the unity of the religious congregation on how to approach the transcendent. In sociological terms, the cohesion of the community is its premise (see Turner 1968: 270).

Among anthropologists, this exclusive definition was standard until the late 1960s. Victor W. Turner (1920–1983) defined 'ritual' in 1968 as 'prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technical routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical (or non-empirical) beings and powers' (Turner 1967: 19; 1968: 15). He repeated it in 1978 (Turner & Turner 1978: 243), and did not revoke it before his early death in late 1983,[22] as far as I am aware.

Inclusive definitions of ritual
By 1968, when Turner re-affirmed the tradition of defining 'ritual' exclusively in terms of religion, de-colonization and the cold war had already dramatically changed the field of study of anthropologists. Many of them had been forced out of the former colonies and had no choice but to find their own niche in the complex secularising societies with scriptural traditions, long histories, and doctrinal religions. These new fields of study forced them to interact more closely with historians, political scientists, and sociologists. And also with ethologists of human behaviour like Erving Goffman, who published several books in the 1950s and 1960s on how we present ourselves in face-to-face encounters in everyday life and in public places, and termed that our 'interaction rituals' (Goffman 1956; 1961; 1963; 1967).

In Goffman's publications on encounter rituals in the secularising societies of the West, a paradigm shift set in towards an inclusive definition of ritual. That was one wide enough to embrace all conventional forms of stylised face-to-face communication between any kind of addressable 'persons,'[23] whether [**254**] human, meta-empirical, animal, plant, or 'alien'. 'Ritual' then referred not only to the (postulated) communication of believers with God, gods, spirits, and ancestors, etc., in traditional kinds of 'religions,' or – in 'indigenous' and modern 'nature' religions – between humans and e.g. trees, or dolphins, or with aliens from outer space in modern space age religions.[24] It also embraced, in addition, specific forms of secular interaction, social, civil, or national, between humans; and between humans and their pets, and as well as among some animals. That development was completed in 1975 with the publication of *Secular Ritual*, a volume of studies edited by Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff.[25]

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definition of 'ritual.'

[22] On Turner, see e.g. Manning 1990 and the other contributions to Ashley 1990; and those to Boudewijnse 1994.

[23] 'Person' is taken here, firstly, in the ancient meaning of *persona* in classical theatre, that is as the mask, by means of which a player impersonates a part in a play, and through which (*per-*) he/she voices (*sonare*) the verses of his/her role, and thereby plays the part of that particular person, or character, in the play. And secondly, it is taken in the technical meaning of any addressable being, who is capable, or deemed to be capable, to understand a message directed at it, and to respond to it, at once and directly, or indirectly and in a retarded manner.

[24] See my study of the IFO-Sananda space age religion (Platvoet 1982a: 48–55, 74–83, 157–174).

[25] This is true only in retrospect. At the time, the editors were able to bridge the notional 'gap' between an exclusive and an inclusive definition of 'ritual' only through a number of intermediate steps in the definition of 'religion.' Starting from a Tylorian substantive definition of 'religion' as 'invoking spirits,' they shifted first to a Durkheimian functional-exclusive definition of 'religion' as 'the unquestionable sacred,' and then to a Tillichian functional-inclusive one of the 'para-religious' kind that takes secular ideologies with unquestionable doctrines and imperatives also as 'religion.' These ideologies have 'rituals' too. They "dramatize social/moral imperatives without invoking the spirits at all" (Moore & Myerhoff 1975: 3). They presented the book as a

The editors discerned the following properties in ritual. It is a collective, repetitive, ordered, and alerting kind of social behaviour that aims to create an attentive and focused state of mind in the addressees. It does that by evocative acting (like playing a part on stage in a theatre), that is by stylised behaviour, using either extra-ordinary actions and symbols, or doing the ordinary in an extra-ordinary way. By these means, ritual provides a frame, a focus, and a structure to a social event. Together these polyphonic means may produce a feeling of 'flow' in the attendants, that is a mental absorption into the ritual. In addition, ritual is traditionalising and legitimising: it dissembles innovation as [**255**] tradition, and provides (the semblance of) permanence and legitimacy to what are actually contingent, and often quite recent, and always arbitrary, cultural constructs (Moore & Myerhoff 1975: 7–8).

Rituals as solidifying society

Turner's definition of 'ritual' was the paradigmatic product of colonial anthropology, which studied small societies in 'remote' parts of the world. Colonial anthropologists mostly studied these societies in the 'timeless typological mode' of structural functionalism (Moore 1994: 39). At a time when these societies were going through immense changes, anthropologists studied them as if they were self-contained, static social systems uncontaminated by outside contact. They romanticized them as 'traditional societies,' endowed with time-tested institutions for maintaining, or regaining, balance and harmony. They saw them as homeostatic social systems[26] in which the 'laws' governing all human societies might be discovered. A natural science of human social life could be developed from their study, said Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown.[27]

These societies were all found to be pervasively religious. So, their rituals were found to be always also religious rituals, at least to some significant degree. In addition, they were taken to be their main institution for maintaining harmony, peace, solidarity, or for restoring them. Turner, who studied the notoriously fissiparous Ndembu society of Zambia, wrote: 'in many African tribes, rituals are performed most frequently when a small community is in danger of splitting up'.[28] He regarded rituals as the social dramas that enabled a society to cope with crises. They were the redressing mechanisms that forestalled that a Ndembu village fell apart. Even when participants expressed hostility towards each other, as in the 'rituals of rebellion',[29] they did so, said Turner, 'in obedience to traditional rules' (Turner 1968: 269). That ensured that cleavages were overcome and 'the peace and harmony typically promised to ritual participants [were] finally […] achieved' (Turner 1968: 269, see also 270, 273–274).

[**256**] In Turner's view, a society's unity was the product of its (religious) rituals, not their premise (see Turner 1968: 270). Turner's analyses of ritual completed Durkheim's functionalist legacy. Though of Jewish descent, Durkheim was an atheist and a sociologist, and defined religion and its rituals as *the* mechanism indispensable to any and every society. By *his* definition, religion, and especially religious cult, united all those adhering to its beliefs and its

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humble attempt to add to established wisdom: 'analogous formal procedures are inspected in secular contexts [in order to see] what new material becomes visible if the supernatural element is stripped away' (Moore & Myerhoff 1975: 4). They restricted the subject of the book to 'collective ceremonial forms … in order to make the religious analogy visible throughout', and bring to attention 'a previously unobserved dimension'. Moore & Myerhoff sounded rather defensive when they stated that they use 'ritual' as 'loosely defined' and 'in its non-technical sense' (Moore & Myerhoff 1975: 4). This implied that Moore & Myerhoff still viewed 'ritual,' when defined 'strictly,' and in a 'technical' sense, as limited to 'religious ritual'.

[26]   Turner terms them 'cyclical repetitive social systems' (1968: 273–277).

[27]   The classical text is Radcliffe-Brown (1952). It is a collection of essays by Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) written between 1924 and 1949. On Radcliffe-Brown, see Kuper 1975: 51–88, *passim*; Morris 1987: 123–131.

[28]   Turner 1968: 278; cf. also 24, 89, and 269-270: 'To complete a ritual … is to overcome cleavages'.

[29]   A category developed by Turner's teacher Max Gluckman; see Kuper 1975: 176–185; Morris 1987: 248–252.

practices, 'into one single moral community called a Church' (Durkheim 1965: 30).[30] 'Beliefs' is used here metaphorically for the 'collective representations,' of a society and 'Church' for 'society'.[31] For, said Durkheim, it is actually society that inspires feelings of dependency into believers. When they direct their cult at any emblem of the unseen orders, it actually is society they worship.[32] Durkheim held that (religious) rituals not only curb our destructive drives and foster feelings of dependency on our community in us, but also that they renew those feelings in the members of a society at regular intervals, and whenever society is threatened by a crisis. They may do so by a frenzied dance driven by electrifying drums in an African forest village, or by a soothing singsong session with candlelight in a Christian church in Germany in a mid-winter night.

Ritual as 'redemptive hegemony'
In the train of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, 'ritual studies' have mainly moved into a praxeological direction in the last two decades, that is, towards the development of a theory of ritual practice (see Bell 1992: 74–117). As legitimating by dissimulation – in Bourdieu's terminology: by *méconnaissance*, 'misrecognition,' failure to apprehend, and even outright denial on the part of the participants –,[33] ritual has been shown to be an effective tool of hegemony [**257**] for the established elite of a society by hiding what it does. For all its alerting, attention captivating qualities, ritual, says Bell, is a 'particularly "mute" form of activity. It is designed to do what it does without bringing what it does across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking' (Bell 1992: 93).

Ritual is a strategically blind 'poetics of power' (Bell 1992: 85; citing Geertz 1980: 123; see also Platvoet 1995a; 1995c: 40–41). It maintains attitudes and views in the participants that dispose them to accept the quite arbitrary, very unequal division of status, power, and income in society as natural, normal, appropriate and fitting. In Bell's beautifully tragic paradox, ritual is 'redemptive hegemony': inequality and oppression which the oppressed fail to see as such, which they explicitly deny, in which they rejoice, and which they fervently defend as fitting (Bell 1992: 83–85). This approach marries perspectives of Marx and Durkheim. Rituals are both effective instruments of power, distinction, discrimination and inequality, and precisely thereby continue to unify societies. They prevent revolution precisely by hiding their violent face. As a result, theory on ritual has not proceeded beyond unifying rituals, because so far rituals have virtually exclusively been studied in the mono-cultural situations of (seemingly) homogeneous societies.

RITUAL AS WAR

Violent rituals
If it makes sense to regard ritual as the ritualisation of communicative encounters between humans (and other addressable beings) (see Bell 1992: 219), then it is unlikely that there are no violent rituals, no rituals of war. For violence and war have always been prominent among the

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[30] See Durkheim 1912: 65; 1965: 30: 'une religion est un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelée Eglise, tous ceux qui y adhèrent'.

[31] See Moore & Myerhoff 1975: 5–7.

[32] For this reason, Durkheim excluded 'magical ritual' from the category of (religious) ritual. For even though he accepted that 'magical ritual' was a communicative behaviour, in which some putative meta-empirical realm was addressed, it did not qualify as (religious) ritual, because it was client-centered in stead of community-orientated. It did not express collective feelings and norms, but was meant to be instrumental to the promotion of the 'selfish' interest of individuals. He summarized this dichotomy between 'religion' and 'magic' by saying: *Il n'y a pas d'Église magique*, 'There is no magic Church' (Durkheim 1965: 30).

[33] On Bourdieu's *méconnaissance*, see Bell 1992: 81, 82–83, 85, 86, 108–110, 114–117, 183–184, 207, 210–211. Bourdieu identifies it also with the symbolic violence and domination a ritual exercises upon the participants (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 167–168, 194–195).

dramatic kinds of encounter of humans, especially in the multicultural situations of plural and pluralist societies, ancient and modern, with their huge internal divisions.[34] That war itself is a ritual, Palestinian boys have amply shown in the past few months when they threw stones at Israeli soldiers, got killed, and were paraded through Palestinian towns under green flags as 'martyrs,' in burial processions that were violent political marches.

It is time, therefore, now to walk finally briefly along the other road: that of the historical data on specific religions in order to show that rituals may indeed show a [**258**] face of violence, and may explode a society instead of unite it, or better unite part of it by exploding it. Or better – and this is as tragic as Bell's redemptive hegemony – they are solidifying a section of society by being explosive of larger society. To demonstrate this, I will briefly review the Ayodhya 'rituals of confrontation', as they were performed in India between 1984 and 1992 (see Platvoet 1995a; 1995c; 1996a). Before I do so, I must make one more methodological point.

The study of ritual so far has virtually exclusively been restricted to what we took to be mono-cultural contexts. It made us take for granted analytically that only one audience is addressed in a ritual, and that that audience takes part in it as a united congregation. That assumption has severely limited the range of communicative events we included into the category 'ritual', and has unduly constrained our analysis of them. It prevented us from seeing, for instance, that in plural and pluralist societies, rituals may address several audiences at once, and in very different ways, by one and the same message.

This is so in particular in modern societies with 'minorities' and modern media. In these 'plural' societies, ethnic groups, or other political constituencies with conflicting interests, foster the cohesion of their communities by cultivating their identities and guarding their borders by means of segregation. They prohibit, severely limit, or strictly regulate contact with other communities, and sanction any 'unwanted' relations, particularly marriages. They also cultivate generalized pejorative prejudices about them. In times of hostility, these communities watch each other intently. They become each other's audiences, whenever one of them conducts a public ritual, for the modern media cover all important events, interpret their *double entendres*, and convey the political import of the message of a religious ritual to the audience for whom it is meant.

The liberation of Rama
One such ominous message, directed in the 1980s in India by militant Hindus to India's large Muslim minority, was that 'Rama must be liberated from his jail', the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. The message also said that that mosque, and other mosques alleged to have been built on Hindu 'holy' sites, must be destroyed, and that India must become a de-secularised Hindu nation. We are dealing here with a dense complex of consonant symbols, expressed in several polyphonic forms. I mention only five.

One is the *Ramayana* epic about the seventh *avatara* ('descent', 'incarnation') of Vishnu, the just ruler Rama, and his faithful wife, Sita. Another is Ayodhya. It is, by itself, a complex of three symbol systems. It is first an iconography in stone by its three thousand temples, most of them devoted to episodes in the story of Rama and [**259**] Sita. It is secondly the pilgrimage center for millions of devotees of Rama. And it is thirdly the headquarters of three types of monks devoted to Rama. They are, firstly, the naked *nagas* (fighter monks) devoted to Rama, but even more to his monkey-general, Hanuman. Secondly, they are the swooning *rasiks* (temple-servants) who devote their lives to serving *Ramsaguna* (Rama qualified): Rama and Sita in their *murtis* (visible shapes), that is as statues in their 'living quarters'. And the third are the peripatetic *tyagis* (peripatetic devotees), who direct their devotion to *Ramnirguna* (Rama unqualified) as the expression of the supreme transcendent 'reality.' The fifth polyphonic form

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[34]   On 'plural' (as distinct from 'pluralist') societies, see Platvoet & Van der Toorn 1995b: 3n1; Platvoet 1995c: 37–38.

is Rama in his capital of Ayodhya, and later as imprisoned there in a Muslim jail. It served, and serves, as a powerful emblem of the grudges of militant Hindus against Muslims and the Indian adherents of other foreign religions, and of the aspirations of Hindu imperialists.

The Rama/Ayodhya complex has been used on three occasions so far in struggles between Hindus and Muslims. Each occurred in periods of political instability, in which power relations were being redefined. The first two were local struggles. The third was a national one.

The first occurred in the period 1850–1860, when the British incorporated the Muslim 'kingdom' of Awadth, in which Ayodhya was situated, into their colony. In 1853, Hindus spread the claim that the Babri mosque had been built on top of the ruins of a temple in honour of *Ramjanmabhumi* (Rama's birthplace) in 1528. It was actually a counterclaim to one made by the tiny local Sunni minority that a mosque had stood in the precincts of *Hanumangarhi*, the fortress convent of the *nagas*, the naked warrior monks. They entered into a pitched battle with the *nagas* to take their right to pray there by force. The *nagas* drove them back into the nearby Babri *mashid*, killing seventy Muslims. A counter *jihad* of local Muslims in February 1856 was quelled by the British in a three-hour pitched battle at the cost of a heavy loss of lives on both sides (Platvoet 1995a: 194–197; 1996a: 135–136).

The second took place in the period 1947–1950, at the de-colonization of the subcontinent and its traumatic division into the secular state of India and the Islamic state of Pakistan (see Ahmed 1982). Tensions ran high in Ayodhya in December 1949, in the run up to elections, when first the *Ramayana* was recited continuously for nine days in front of the *Babrimashid* (Babri mosque), and then, in the night of 22–23 December, statues of Rama and Sita were smuggled into the mosque. The claim was made then that they had miraculously 'appeared' in the mosque to reclaim that spot for themselves. Riots between Muslims and Hindus followed. When these had been quelled, the Babri mosque was declared out of bounds for both Muslims and Hindus, but the statues of Rama and Sita were not removed from it. Thus Rama got imprisoned into the *Babrimashid*.

[**260**] The national confrontation was orchestrated between 1984 and 1992 by two RRS-organizations,[35] the VHP,[36] its religious affiliate, and the BJP,[37] its political party. In the run-up to national elections of 1985, 1989 and 1993, they organized nation-wide electoral mass-mobilizations campaigns, by which the tensions between the Hindu majority and large Muslim minority were further incited. The appeal to Hindus to make sacrifices for the liberation of Rama's birthplace, for freeing Rama from his jail, and promoting *Hindutva* (Hindudom), the Hinduisation and de-secularisation of India, were the focal points in all three campaigns, but more in particular of the first one, in the autumn of 1984.

It consisted of a procession of vans with large statues of Rama and Sita, from *Sitamarhi* (Sita's birthplace) in Bihar, to Ayodhya. It was presented as a *Ramarathayathra* (pilgrimage of war chariots of Rama), for the vans traveled along the road, which Rama was said to have traversed in his war chariot in mythical times in order to collect his bride Sita. In all the towns and villages along the route, mass rallies were held in which numerous VHP-*sadhus* ('holy men') and militants urged the masses to vote for the BJP and demanded the destruction of mosques on Hindu 'holy' sites. This procession, and later demonstrations of Hindu fervor passed on purpose through districts and regions in which Hindu-Muslim tensions were already running high, and caused them at times to explode. Their coverage by the news media at times set in train more explosions of 'communal violence' in other parts of India. After Ayodhya, the campaign continued towards Delhi, but it fell flat before it reached the capital, when on 31 October 1984 Indira Gandhi was murdered by her Sikh bodyguard.

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[35]   *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (National Volunteer Corps), a militant Hindu cultural reform movement founded in 1925; see Platvoet 1995a: 188n9, 188–189; 1996a, 127n1. The RSS is also called the *sangh parivar* (the Family) because it consists of numerous affiliated organizations; see Platvoet 1995a: 188–189.

[36]   *Vishva Hindu Parisad* (Hindu World Federation); see Platvoet 1995a: 202n86; 1996a: 127n2.

[37]   *Bharatiya Janata* Party (Indian People's Party); see Platvoet 1995: 188n10.

The next campaign in 1989 was the *Ramshilas* (bricks of Rama) campaign. 300.000 bricks for 'rebuilding' the temple on Rama's birthplace, were sent to Hindu congregations throughout India and the rest of the world. They were solemnly consecrated there in *shilapujas* (brick rituals), and then carried by VHP and BJP activists conspicuously along all Hindu households to ask for donations for 'rebuilding' *Ramjanmabhumi*, Rama's birthplace temple. After this they were transported in conspicuous processions from all over India to Ayodhya in early November 1989. The passage of these caravans through Muslim districts again led to violent clashes, particularly in Bihar, with hundreds of dead on both [**261**] sides. In the 1989 election, the BJP scored its first major electoral success. It rose from 2 to 88 seats in the Parliament of India.

In the period 1990–1992, the BJP leader Advani conducted a 10.000 kilometres long *Ramrathayatra* through India exhorting Hindus to *Rambhakti* (fervent devotion to Rama), *lokshakti* (people's power), and *Ramakarseva* (voluntary service to Rama), for rebuilding his temple in Ayodhya. The procession's war cry was: 'we will build the temple there, and only there.' Thousands of youths joined him for *karseva*, mainly by swelling the ranks of *Bajrang Dal*, the militant youth association of the RSS.

To cut a long story short, it was this youth movement that supplied the 44.000 *karsevaks* who served as storm troopers on 6 December 1992. They cleared the way to the heavily guarded Babri mosque in Ayodhya for a specially trained force of 1.200 youths who reduced it to rubble in less than six hours, at the cost of several lives. This event was flashed all over the world that very same day. A nationwide violence followed taking a toll of 1.700 dead and over 5.000 wounded.

These violent rituals have paid off for the RSS. The BJP is now the ruling party of India. In the ongoing confrontation with Pakistan, India has 'tested' its own atomic bomb. India has taken over the production of the sophisticated Mig-fighter planes from ailing Russia. An ICT-revolution is on its way in India, and it is exporting both software and software engineers. Part of the *Hindutva* ideology of the RSS/BJP is a Hindu imperialist aspiration. They aim to regain political, cultural and religious control over not only the whole of the subcontinent, but also over those other parts of South East Asia, in which Hindu influence has been strong in those 'glorious' periods when Hindu kingdoms and empires called the tune in that region.

IN CONCLUSION

'Rituals of war' are not limited only to plural societies with histories of 'communal violence.' Rituals expressing hostility are endemic in many religions, and in at least some of them, they have been their most central feature since time immemorial.

An example of the latter is the so-called 'curing dances' of the San, or Bushmen, in the Kalahari region of Southern Africa. Their tiny bands, or camps, had[38] reciprocity, equality and sharing as their key values (see Guenther 1999: 142; [**262**] Platvoet 1999a: 21–23, 45–46, 49–50; 2000b: 124–125) since time immemorial.[39] They used their one and only religious ritual (see Platvoet 1999a: 33–34; Guenther 1999: 181), the trance dance, for two purposes. One was to share out *n/um* ('healing power') among themselves (see Platvoet 1999a: 34–39; 2000b: 127–129; Guenther 1999: 183–184). As such, the curing dance was a powerful rite of solidarity and inclusion. The other was to eject all blame for dissent, disease and death out of the camp

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[38] I am using the past tense, because the ethnographic data I use relate to the 2.500 San who still lived mainly as foragers in the 1950s and 1960s (on a total number of 40.000). As these San too have adopted a sedentary way of life now, foraging as a way of life has virtually disappeared by now among the San (Platvoet 1999a: 13–17). The trance dance, however, has not declined in importance. Sedentary San are practising it even more frequently, for one reason because it serves as a means of cultural revitalization for them. See Platvoet 1999a: 17–18n77, 56n262; Guenther 1999: 182, 192–196.

[39] Witness their rock paintings; see Platvoet 1999a: 5–11, 44, 46–48; 2000b: 124; Guenther 1999: 181–182; see also the literature referred to in Platvoet 1999a, e.g. Dowson & Lewis-Williams 1994.

by projecting it onto 'god' and the dead. The trance dancers did this in the final dramatic phase of a trance. Having 'pulled out' all evil from the members of the band, the trance dancer either threw it back to 'its origin', 'god' and the dead believed to be lurking in the dark, yelling abuse at them and charging towards them with burning sticks. Or he collapsed into a catatonic visionary state in which he was believed to seek out a shamanic fashion the 'spiritual beings', that had 'sent' the evil, and confront them (see Platvoet 1999a: 34–44; 2000b: 129–132; Guenther 1999: 185–188). As such the trance dance was a dramatic ritual of exclusion, of boundary maintenance with, and war on, god and the dead, and of chasing them off, time and again (see Platvoet 1999a: 49–53; 2000b: 131–132; Guenther 1999: 188–189).

I suggest that rituals of war, confrontation and exclusion[40] are endemic in all religions. That is certainly the case for traditional orthodox and modern Pentecostal Christianity. Both are predicated doctrinally on an absolute dualism between God and Satan. That enmity is magnificently dramatized in the classical ritual exorcism of the *Rituale Romanum*. Blumhardt rediscovered its ritual practice under the guidance of Gottliebin Dittus (see Blumhardt 1979). The exorcism of devils and demons is practiced presently in rather restrained and subdued ways in charismatic and Pentecostal faith healing in the West, but it is celebrated in florid rituals in much of modern African Christianity (see e.g. Meyer 1992; 1995).

Discerning that rituals may be openly violent, and integrating that awareness into the analytical notion of 'ritual', represents, in my view, a significant step in the de-westernisation of this *etic* category in *Religionswissenschaft* as an academic discipline for the comparative study of religions and their rituals, as well as in 'ritual studies'.

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40   For rituals of exclusion, see also Chidester 1988: 12–24.

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