

The Importance of Being “Ernest”

Robert N. McCauley, Center for Mind, Brain, and Culture, Emory University

1. Introduction

In a scene in “The Importance of Being Earnest” Oscar Wilde pinpoints an array of properties of religious ritual systems that cognitive theorizing about religious rituals, viz., the theory of religious ritual competence, has subsequently systematized (Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002). To the amusement of hundreds of audiences, Wilde’s play also identifies a conundrum for religious ritual systems. Cognitive theory about religious ritual suggests that the solutions to that conundrum may bear directly on the comparative advantages of religious systems in competitive religious markets. After briefly sketching some connections between cognition and religious ritual that constitute the foundations of my and Tom Lawson’s theory of religious ritual competence in section 2, section 3 summarizes the theory’s account of a set of systematic relations that arise in all religious ritual systems as a result of cognitive constraints on rituals’ representation. Section 4 explores how increasing the frequency with which some religious rituals are performed purchases for a religious system some selective advantages but how realizing that pattern of ritual practices would require overcoming some formidable empirical and logical challenges. Wilde’s handling of these matters in one of the scenes of his famous drawing room comedy is the subject of section 5. Section 6 discusses the relative promise of three ritual arrangements that offer hope of circumventing the conundrum, which this scene from “The Importance of Being Earnest” highlights. Section 7 shows that Wilde’s treatment encapsulates the tell-tale features, save one (which is the source of the humor), that, according to the theory of religious ritual competence, would arise under such circumstances.

2. Religious Rituals and Theory of Mind

Religious rituals always involve presumptions about some very special agents. Simply construing them as “agents” with whom humans can interact is every bit as important for grasping the structure and character of religious ritual systems as is anything about those agents’ counter-intuitive properties. Religious ritual systems allow “transactions” with such agents that have import for participants’ “quasi-social” relationships with them. Participants’ understandings of their religious rituals rely on standard cognitive equipment for the representation of agents and their actions. These components of theory of mind furnish the basic framework for explicating the logic behind participants’ ritual interactions with the gods, and they are ones that even children understand (Richert 2006).

In a world populated with both predators and nefarious characters, it is not difficult to see how vital to humans’ survival it is that they quickly learn to distinguish agents from other things in the world and actions from other events. Many animals can detect predators and prey, but the detection of the bad guys among conspecifics requires more (Tomasello 1999, 74). That depends on an ability to discern others’ intentional states. Developing a sophisticated version of theory of mind that comprises, among other things, the capacity to read disreputable characters’ intentional states establishes someone as qualified to participate readily in human society – but not just in human society. They are qualified to interact with *any* intentional agents. Armed with an ability

to surmise others' intentional states, we recognize a subset of agents with whom we can interact in complicated ways and whose aid we might be able to recruit. Religions introduce agents possessing counter-intuitive properties (CI-agents, hereafter) to the membership of that subset, and religious rituals are the principal means by which humans interact with those agents.

Religious rituals cue human's cognitive systems for representing actions, which leads people to infer that something is getting done. In religious rituals humans move their heads, limbs, and bodies in coordinated ways or they move around in the kinds of paths that suggest that their movements are both goal directed and intentional. They bow their heads, kneel, and lift their hands; they pile stones, circle designated spaces, lift objects, lay out food, pour liquids, and, especially, wash and clean people and things. People also emit formulaic utterances.

Pascal Boyer and Pierre Lienard have advanced insightful proposals about "ritualized behaviors" in our species (Lienard and Boyer 2006; Boyer and Lienard 2006). They argue that various cultural arrangements' "cognitive capture" of evolved dispositions of the human mind is responsible for everything about religious rituals from the fact that they must be carried out just right each and every time, to the fact that at each step they require concentration on the particular components of the action at hand, to their focus on a comparatively small set of recurrent themes. Those themes have to do with such things as managing problems of contamination, hence the focus on cleaning and washing, and creating and maintaining order and boundaries.

This paper takes up but one example of such capture of maturationally natural mental systems by religious ritual, though arguably it is the most basic example. That is the ability of religious rituals to mimic enough features of everyday intentional action to cue the operation of humans' mental equipment for its representation "as action carried out by intentional agents." The motions and the utterances that people execute in religious rituals give the appearance that things are being done by intentional agents. In our theory of religious ritual competence Lawson and I have argued that this activation of the human cognitive system for the representation of action imposes fundamental, though commonplace, constraints on religious ritual form (Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002). Attention to these constraints enables us to look beyond the variability of religious rituals' culturally specific details to some of their most general underlying features. Religious rituals, despite what often seem to be their bizarre, inexplicable qualities, are conceived as intentional actions too, and human beings bring the same representational apparatus to bear on them as they do on all other actions.

Religious rituals have various counter-intuitive properties. The fact that in many religious rituals participants interact with perpetually undetectable CI-agents is only the beginning. Unlike their everyday actions, the ritual actions religious participants undertake also have no transparent instrumental aim. Why, for example, must some person be cleaned, when what *is* transparent is that they have already gone to great lengths to cleanse themselves? Why must people be kneeling when they drink from a cup? Why must initiates be put through excruciating tortures? The repetitions with which religious rituals are replete only magnify their lack of instrumentality. Why must pilgrims climb a mountain seven times? Why must a priest walk around an altar three times, especially since no matter how many times he does so he ends up where he started?

Harvey Whitehouse observes that in this respect rituals resemble works in the performing arts. Rituals, like theater, dance, and concertizing, have no "technical motivation" (Whitehouse 2004, 166). This is one of the reasons that both ritual and artistic performances can often be repeated time and time again, where the idea is precisely that the *same* act is carried out each time.

Rituals are like works in the performing arts in a second respect. The connections between peoples' intentional states and their actions in rituals and plays are indirect at best. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) have stressed that many features of people's actions in these settings take the forms that they do not as a *direct* result of the ritual participants' (or the actors') current states of mind but because they follow a prescribed script. Whitehouse's observation that this intentional indirection in rituals poses unending interpretive problems for our mind-reading machinery is, no doubt, true (Whitehouse 2004, 166). The disconnect in religious rituals between agents' actions and their current intentional states, however, occurs at another point as well. Not only can ritual participants be thinking about something else entirely, *it does not matter if they are*. That, at least, is what Lawson and I have argued for a set of rituals that stand at the core of each religious ritual system (McCauley and Lawson 2002, 13-16). These religious rituals are effective not because of human participants' states of mind but, putatively, because of their *forms*, which CI-agents have specified. The prescribed scripts for these rituals disclose the gods' wishes about how they and humans are to interact. Thus, properly qualified participants cannot fake those core religious rituals. If a properly qualified ritual practitioner carries out one of these rituals on an appropriate ritual patient, the ritual has been performed, regardless of what the practitioner or the patient might have been thinking.

The theory of religious ritual competence maintains that even minimal assumptions about humans' representation of actions, as opposed to their representations of other events, disclose avenues for understanding recurrent properties of religious rituals and religious ritual systems *across cultures* (Malley and Barrett 2003). Anthropologists and scholars of religion have identified various patterns in religious ritual systems (e.g., Van Gennep 1960), but it has only been an appeal to underlying cognitive considerations that has yielded a theory that organizes and explains those patterns. Assuming no more than that humans can readily distinguish agents from other things and actions from other events and that their representations of actions will include slots (1) for agents, (2) for the acts that those agents carry out (including the instruments they employ), (3) for the patients of those actions, and (4) for properties that distinguish these various items provides a framework for organizing, explaining, and predicting features of religious rituals. No matter how extraordinary religious rituals may appear, they call for no unique representational apparatus. They enlist the same maturationally natural cognitive capacities that children use in the representation of actions, whether real *or pretend*. They do incorporate representations of agents with some modestly counter-intuitive properties, but in that respect, they countenance nothing more than what is at stake in the comprehension of folk tales and fantasy—and a good deal *less* than what the representation of most scientific theories demands (McCauley 2000).

Agents do things to other things, including other agents. Since all the actions that constitute a religious system's core rituals involve agents acting upon patients, the cognitive representation of a religious ritual will contain three ordered slots. These slots represent the three fundamental roles, i.e., they represent, first, the ritual's agent, second, the act that is carried out (with instruments optional), and, third, its patient. All of a religious ritual's critical details fall within the purviews of one or the other of these three roles. Accommodating the rest of the details about the ritual's form, then, amounts to nothing more than elaborations on the entries for these three slots. My and Lawson's claim that all *core* religious rituals are represented as actions in which an agent does something to a patient departs from widespread, less restrictive assumptions about what may count as religious rituals. Priests baptize babies, ritual participants burn offerings, and pilgrims circle shrines. But people also carry out religious actions that have

no patients. For example, they pray, sing, chant, and kneel. Even though such activities may accompany core religious rituals, such activities, in and of themselves, do not qualify as core religious rituals. Religious rituals – in this narrower sense – involve CI-agents doing things to ritual patients or participants doing things to or for those CI-agents. What I am here calling “core” religious rituals are concerned with transactions between participants and CI-agents. These rituals are inevitably connected sooner or later with actions in which CI-agents play a role and that bring about some change in the religious world, whose recognition is available to some public or other.

Many other actions in religious contexts constitute ritualized behaviors in Boyer and Lienard's sense, but the distinction Lawson and I draw is not arbitrary. A variety of theoretically independent considerations triangulate on the same set of religious actions as a religious system's core rituals. For example, these core religious rituals *cannot be faked*. People can pretend to pray, but a priest in good standing cannot just go through the motions when baptizing an eligible patient. If those motions are gone through by a duly ordained priest, then the patient is baptized, regardless of peoples' intentions. This feature is a function of core rituals' public availability. The consequences of carrying out these core rituals are “inter-subjectively available” to at least some participants, though usually to the public at large as well. Under the appropriate publicly observable conditions, participants who are privy to performances of these rituals can know what has been accomplished. Therefore, these core religious rituals, unlike other religious acts and ritualized behaviors, bring about recognized changes in the religious world (temporary in some cases, permanent in others). This is by virtue of the fact that these rituals involve transactions with CI-agents. *How people act subsequently and the categories they employ change* as a result of the alterations in someone or something's religious status that these core rituals achieve. In particular, they sometimes bring about *changes in participants' eligibility to participate in additional core rituals*. While participating in anything other than entry-level religious rituals turns unwaveringly on having performed earlier religious rituals, carrying out other sorts of ritualized behaviors and religious actions does not. So, for example, a Jew must have gone through his bar mitzvah in order for him to qualify to become a rabbi, but that ritual accomplishment is not a necessary condition for him to pray.

To repeat, it is not any special transformations of the operations or the structures of the outputs of the human action representation system that sets religious rituals apart. Their distinctiveness, instead, turns exclusively on introducing CI-agents into at least one of the slots of their action representations (see figure 1). It is the insertion of agents possessing counter-intuitive properties into the slots of religious rituals' action structures that is both distinctive and determinative. It distinguishes the subset of those events receiving action representations that qualify as core religious rituals, and it determines what type of core religious ritual is at stake and, thus, what properties it will exhibit. What Lawson and I call the Principle of Superhuman Agency (PSA in figure 1) holds, in effect, that the role a CI-agent is accorded in a religious ritual's action structure is the key consideration for predicting a number of that ritual's features (Barrett and Lawson 2001; Sorensen et al. 2006). The role that an agent with counter-intuitive properties assumes in the action representation of a religious ritual may arise on the basis of that CI-agent's direct participation in the ritual or through the direct participation of the CI-agent's ritually established intermediary, typically some religious specialist such as a priest (Stark and Bainbridge 1996, 89-104).

3. Types of Core Religious Rituals

In rituals in which representations of these CI-agents arise first in connection with the agent-slot of a ritual representation (e.g., in Christian baptism, where the priest as intermediary baptizes the ritual patient), the ritual in question will normally be performed on each individual patient *only once*. Lawson and I have dubbed these “special agent rituals” (McCauley and Lawson 2002, 26-33). The idea here is that when the CI-agents do something – even through their intermediaries – it is done once and for all. The gods do not have to do things to the same patient over and over. This is the sense in which we have described these rituals as non-repeated – even though the ritual is repeated with different patients. Since the CI-agents act in special agent rituals (rites of passage such as baptisms, confirmations, and bar mitzvahs as well as weddings, ordinations, consecrations, investitures, etc.), the consequences of these rituals are what Lawson and I have dubbed “super-permanent” (McCauley and Lawson 1990, 134, fn. 8). Their effects can extend beyond or can even occur completely outside of the time when the ritual patient exists.

Under most circumstances, people readily comprehend that these special agent rituals are supposed to effect lasting changes in ritual patients. One danger, however, is that the ritual patients themselves might notice that little, if anything, has been done. Consequently, these special agent rituals need to incorporate features that will convince patients that something remarkable has transpired. This is why successful religious ritual systems evolve in a direction that insures that these rituals contain comparatively high levels of sensory pageantry aimed at seizing the patient’s attention and arousing his or her emotions. What counts as “high levels of sensory pageantry” in any particular community is relative to local standards, but special agent rituals are more likely to engage more means and more extreme means for producing sensory stimulation than other types of religious rituals. In many religious systems these rituals will routinely be accompanied by special food and drink, clothing, music, dance, flowers, oils, incense, and more. “Sensory pageantry” is intended to be inclusive. The means for eliciting appropriately receptive states of mind are not confined to arousal through sensory stimulation.¹ Some religions administer psychotropic substances to ritual participants. Nor do special agent rituals always employ appealing forms of sensory stimulation. Deprivations and torture are just as effective at seizing attention and arousing emotion and, generally, they are cheaper (Whitehouse 1996; Atran 2002, 175).

Ritual patients in states of emotional or other psychic arousal are more likely to affirm that something important is happening to them in those rituals (Richert et al. 2005). They are, after all, directly experiencing those rituals’ effects. In such fraught circumstances, if someone is convinced that something profound has happened, human minds, infiltrated with mythological narratives, leap to the conclusion that *someone* must be responsible.

These special agent rituals evolve to manipulate precisely the variables that research in experimental psychology has suggested are pivotal in generating particularly salient memory for specific events (McCauley 1999). Emotional arousal can intimate that some event may be noteworthy in the life of an individual. By itself, though, this is not enough. We regularly forget events of high emotion, if, for example, they turn out to be false alarms or if we have no reason or occasion to rehearse or recall them subsequently. If, however, the event produces emotional or cognitive arousal (Whitehouse 2004, 113-115), *and* the individual directly participates in the event, *and* the individual has occasions to rehearse the event in memory or to describe the event to others, *and* social companions acknowledge over the long term the event’s import not only for

¹ For particularly intriguing possibilities, see Persinger and Healey 2002.

the individual but also for the community as a whole, then the event is likely to stand as a benchmark in that individual's life story (McCauley and Lawson 2002, chapter 2). These are just the conditions that special agent rituals produce.

Other core religious rituals secure their recollection differently. When a representation of a CI-agent first arises in connection either with that ritual's instrument or with its patient, it occasions a contrasting constellation of properties. These "special instrument" and "special patient" rituals, unlike their special agent counterparts, are capable of repetition with the same participants and can even involve what can, sometimes, seem like incessant repetition. For example, Christians may bless themselves repeatedly or partake of the Eucharist weekly, even though they are typically baptized only once. Special instrument and special patient rituals are ones that participants perform so frequently that they feel habitual. Ritual performance often becomes the exercise of a well-rehearsed skill like any other, such as riding a bicycle. Within religious communities, the levels of sensory pageantry associated with these rituals are less than those with special agent rituals.

In these rituals people either do things to or for the CI-agents (in special patient rituals such as sacrifices) or they do things with the help of artifacts, including verbal artifacts, associated with CI-agents (in special instrument rituals such as blessings). These rituals are repeatable, because their effects are temporary only. They do not have super-permanent consequences. Humans are always in need of further help—another blessing never hurts. Or, in the case of special patient rituals, the appetites of the gods are insatiable—the gods *never* cease to want their share of material wealth (Diamond 1998, chapter 14). Therefore, participants typically perform these rituals over and over. Obligations to repeat these rituals can consume considerable time and resources. Consequently, religious ritual systems are more likely to permit a wider range of substitutions in rituals of these forms. For example, when times are tough, it will be acceptable for a Nuer to sacrifice a wild cucumber as a substitute for an ox (Firth 1963).

Performance frequency, levels of sensory pageantry, and participants' cognitive representations of religious rituals' *forms* are psychologically_influential variables that can define an abstract three dimensional space of possible ritual arrangements. This space contains two attractors (see figure 2 below). Most religious rituals fall at one or the other of these two attractor positions. These two attractors make sense of the paradoxical associations most of us have about religious rituals

The first attractor at the bottom right in the front depicts our notion that rituals are routine actions that are performed so frequently that participants are often said to do them "mindlessly." Special instrument and special patient rituals typically rely on the sheer frequency with which they are performed to insure that participants recall them. For reasons both psychological and economic, they usually do not enlist high levels of sensory pageantry.

People, however, also think of religious rituals as highly stimulating events that mark some of the most important and memorable moments of their lives. Those rituals cluster at the second attractor at the top left in the back. So, although special agent rituals are infrequently performed (typically only once), they characteristically recruit high levels of sensory pageantry, which help establish both prominent episodic memories and a conviction that the patient has been touched by the gods. Serving as the patient of such rituals is likely to manufacture salient memories that contribute fundamentally to participants' understandings of themselves (Hinde 1999, 110). These rituals and the culturally available narratives that surround their performance become integral to participants' identities.

Whether through seemingly endless repetition in the case of special instrument and special patient rituals or through signaling culturally momentous events in the case of special agent rituals, the inherent mnemonic advantages of rituals at these two attractors increase the probabilities that participants will transmit both these rituals and the religious systems in which they are embedded. Memory for rituals that is sufficient to secure a collective sense of continuity is vital for transmission. People cannot transmit what they cannot remember. People will not transmit rituals that they regard as spurious (Barth 1987). Religious rituals cluster at these attractors, then, because the conditions they represent are virtually guaranteed to enhance memory for these rituals, because they cohere with participants' cognitive representations of the actions in question, and, in the case of special agent rituals especially, because they enhance participants' commitment to the religious system and increase the probabilities of their transmitting it.

4. Selection Pressure for Repeating Special Agent Rituals with the Same Patients

That enhancing memory, conviction, and motivation to transmit a religious system is a good thing for the perpetuation of that system, especially in competitive religious markets, suggests that a religion would enjoy a distinct advantage over its competitors by increasing the number of special agent rituals that a ritual participant undergoes. A variety of possibilities are available.

One way to achieve that end is simply to invent more special agent rituals. Fredrik Barth's *Ritual and Knowledge Among the Baktaman* (1975) describes the initiatory rites for males in a small scale society in highland New Guinea. The Baktaman have seven degrees of initiation. Collectively, the performances of these various rituals span approximately twenty years in initiates' lives. Some of these rites involve excruciating treatment. A cohort of youngsters begins this series of initiations every few years and goes through each of the rituals together as a group. The demand for secrecy among the initiates concerning these rites (in a non-literate culture) signifies that the contents of the initiations may be less important than the fact that they go through them together. Their joint experiences establish a bond among these young men that continues throughout their lives. In a society as small as that of the Baktaman (which numbered fewer than 200 people when Barth did his fieldwork), such bonds are a major thread in the social fabric. In groups that are thousands or tens of thousands of times larger than Baktaman society, however, such a system is less practical, less intimate, and less likely to be permissible legally.

A second way to increase the number of special agent rituals that participants undergo would be to find a way to repeat special agent rituals with the same ritual patients. Perhaps the most obvious example is introducing the possibility for multiple marriages (whether in various small scale societies, in Islam, or in the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints). The problem here, of course, is that for a host of reasons—social, political, and economic—such opportunities are confined to small numbers of participants, usually, only powerful, wealthy males. Since so few people qualify to participate in these repeated rites, they are unlikely to have much impact on the transmission of the religious system overall.

The widespread repetition of special agent rituals with the same patients is not as easy it may first appear. Empirical and logical considerations constrain their repetition. Psychological, biological, and material constraints restrict the increasing levels of sensory pageantry that are necessary when high-arousal special agent rituals occur with increasing frequency with the same

patients. The principal psychological problem is participants' progressive habituation to increasing levels of sensory stimulation (McCauley and Lawson 2002, 184-189). Ritual patients can become habituated to the sensory pageantry when high pageantry rituals occur frequently enough. Participants will require increasingly higher "doses" of that sensory stimulation in order to achieve the same levels of engagement, arousal, and inspiration.

Two sorts of considerations, however, regulate how much sensory pageantry a ritual should incorporate. At the individual level, the human organism's biological limits check how much sensory stimulation a person can endure before it induces unconscious states such as sleep, coma, or death. There are also material limits on how much sensory pageantry a community can produce (e.g., how much food is available for feasts). The human and material resources that are necessary to produce ever increasing amounts of sensory pageantry for the patients of special agent rituals can be substantial. With repeated performances those costs can easily become prohibitive.

The repetition of special agent rituals with the same patients also generates a conundrum. In these rituals CI-agents do things to participants, and there is no need for them to do them again. Individuals normally serve as the patients of special agent rituals only once. Baktaman boys go through each initiation only once, just as Jewish males have only one bar mitzvah, and Christians (usually) get baptized only once. The gods do not need to repeat themselves ritually, so religions must circumvent a formidable conceptual roadblock if they are to obtain the advantages that result from repeating special agent rituals.

5. Earnest Exploitation

Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" (1996) exploits these distinctive features of special agent rituals to comic ends. Two young women, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, who both entertain exalted romantic ideals, also both profess their preference to marry a man named "Ernest." That mutual inclination is motivated by their mistaken beliefs that their respective suitors are both named "Ernest." Their suitors, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, have each led his beloved into believing that his name *is* Ernest. In order to bring reality into conformity with their deceptions, Jack and Algy independently hit upon the idea of being christened "Ernest" by the local vicar, Dr. Chasuable. Once they learn about one another's plans, they debate their relative suitability for that rite:

Algy: . . . I have just made arrangements with Dr. Chasuable to be christened at a quarter to six under the name of Ernest.

Jack: My dear fellow, the sooner you give up that nonsense the better. I made arrangements this morning with Dr. Chasuable to be christened myself at 5:30, and I naturally will take the name of Ernest. . . . I have a perfect right to be christened if I like. There is no evidence at all that I have ever been christened by anybody. . . . It is entirely different in your case. You have been christened already.

Algy: Yes, but I have not been christened for years.

Jack: Yes, but you have been christened. That is the important thing.

Algy: Quite so. So I know my constitution can stand it. If you are not quite sure about your ever having been christened, I must say that I think it rather dangerous your venturing on it now. It might make you very unwell. (Wilde 1996, 351)

The humor in this exchange turns on the fact that some religious rituals, including christenings, not only do not need to be repeated with the same ritual patient, but, in fact, should not be. Once christened, a person should not be christened again. Wilde understood that this fact is obvious to anyone who has the most elementary knowledge of Christianity. (The exchange also discloses Wilde's recognition of some far less obvious points about religious ritual systems, viz., that it is just the kind of rituals in question that can be physically and psychologically taxing but that repeating some of these rituals carries some attractions, nonetheless.²)

Implicitly appealing to the principle that having undergone some rituals (e.g., christening) as their patient renders a participant ineligible to undergo them again, Jack argues that his and Algy's cases fundamentally differ. Jack has never been christened, whereas Algy has been christened already. Jack's unstated conclusion is that unlike Algy, he is eligible to be christened "Ernest." As evidenced by both his forceful assertion of his own suitability for this rite and his observation that Algy has already been christened, Jack signals that Algy is obligated to supply a rationale for any second christening. The fact that Algy immediately offers an explanation signals that Algy also understands that it is he who bears the burden of proof. Algy concedes that he has been christened, but he goes on to point out that he has "not been christened for years." Algy's pretext is a guaranteed laugh-line. Audience members recognize that Algy owes an explanation of a particular sort to justify a second christening. What Algy must show is that his situation constitutes a circumstance in which a special agent ritual can justifiably be repeated.

The humor of Algy's rationalization for his hastily scheduled christening, viz., that he has not been christened for years, lurks in his utterly ignoring the distinctive feature of special agent rituals that provokes his need to provide an excuse for his second christening in the first place. Algy's response thoroughly disregards the ritual's most conspicuous consequence, viz., its super-permanent effect on the patient's religious status. In more than a century of productions, directors and actors know intuitively how and why this scene works. They know how to play it. They know how audiences who possess even the most rudimentary knowledge of Christianity will respond.

The operative principle is that *special agent rituals should only be performed once with each ritual patient*. Under normal circumstances to re-perform some special agent ritual with the same patient violates participants' understandings of *any* religious ritual system. Additional performances will demand a rationale that points to some extraordinary circumstance justifying the ritual's repetition. Both the contents and the readiness of Algy's response indicate that Wilde understood all of this, so I dub the italicized rule above the Oscar Wilde Principle. The next section inventories the unusual circumstances that supply means for evading the Wilde Principle and assesses their prospects.

6. An Inventory of Ritually Relevant, Extraordinary Circumstances

At least three circumstances, reversibility, failure, and substitution, promise paths around the Oscar Wilde Principle.

Because their consequences are temporary, there is no reason to reverse special instrument and special patient rituals. By contrast, all special agent rituals are reversible in

² See McCauley and Lawson 2002, 42-44 and 183-201.

principle, if not in fact. Reversing a special agent ritual's consequences permits its re-performance with the same patient.

Divorce is the best known example of reversing the consequences of a special agent ritual, but there are plenty of other examples. These include excommunication and defrocking, as well as de-consecration, i.e., reversing the religious status of consecrated buildings and objects. Although many of these reversals of special agent rituals are accomplished by juridical (rather than ritual) means, for example, in Roman Catholicism, innovative ritual reversals do pop up in religious communities (Sibley 1994).

By whatever means it is accomplished, though, reversals of most special agent rituals are comparatively rare; even in the case of divorce, divorces occur far less often than weddings. None of this should be too surprising, for plentiful, religiously sanctioned reversals of special agent rituals generate problems of their own. The obvious practical problems may be the least of it. Indiscriminate reversals risk portraying the gods as fickle—an arrangement that seems less likely to ground a stable religious system, especially if that fickleness extends to matters that are as integral to human groups as pair bonding. Whether the perception that the proliferation of serial divorces or of priests being defrocked so that they may marry will undermine a culture's religious and moral foundations is accurate or not, the fact remains that religiously sanctioned ritual reversals are infrequent, relative to the number of performances of the special agent rituals that they undo. For *any* religious system, widespread, religiously sanctioned, reversals of special agent rituals will be destabilizing.

The second path around the Wilde Principle is a declaration of ritual failure. This has two advantages over reversals. First, whereas the reversal of a special agent ritual's consequences only renders its repetition possible, the failure of a special agent ritual can create a sense of urgency about its re-performance. For some unknown reason, the gods have refused to carry out the religious transformation of the patients that they were to accomplish. Participants must ascertain the reason for the gods' refusal, address it, and then enlist them again in a repetition of the special agent ritual. Its second advantage is that ritual failure can justify the repetition of special agent rituals with large numbers of ritual patients. Failure can apply to all of the uninitiated (as opposed to the few participants who have undergone reversals). Still, for different reasons, this second path for eluding the Wilde Principle proves even more perilous than the first.

Whitehouse (1995) documents the rise and fall of a splinter group among participants in the Pomio Kivung cargo cult on East New Britain Island in the late 1980s and provides a glimpse of the consequences of repeated failures to perform a special agent ritual. The members of the splinter group repeatedly performed a new special agent, ring ritual that was to mark the ancestors' arrival with vast amounts of cargo and transform the participants' religious status that very night. Repeated failures to bring about this new millennium over six weeks provoked both daily ruminations about the reasons for the failures and recurring habituation among the participants. Each subsequent performance required increasing levels of sensory pageantry to sustain participants' interest. Numerous re-performances of the unsuccessful ring ritual consumed the community's resources at a break-neck pace. After six weeks of increasingly stimulating performances on what was nearly a nightly basis, the splinter group crashed from, among other things, want of resources. They had slaughtered all their pigs, eaten all their crops, and neglected all their gardens. The moral of the story seems to be that without firm interpretive control of the outcomes of ritual performances, declarations of failure quickly run up against the

psychological, biological, and material perils (outlined in section 4 above) that are associated with the frequent repetition of high pageantry, special agent rituals.

Other problems arise, even when a religious system can manage the interpretation of a ritual failure, for none of the obvious interpretations are particularly palatable, especially in the case of *repeated* failures. A failure suggests any or all of (a) *iniquity* on the part of the participants, (b) *incompetence* on the part of the practitioners, or (c) *indifference* or *impotence* on the part of the gods. The first option is probably the most popular, but none of them can wear terribly well in the long run. A further liability of declarations of ritual failure is that they are only made retrospectively in an *ad hoc* fashion. Failures do not offer systematic grounds for repetition.

The third means for eluding the Wilde Principle is ritual substitution. It offers the greatest promise for meeting what is, in effect, a selection pressure on religious systems to repeat these rituals with the same patients. If participants who have already served as the patients of special agent rituals can serve repeatedly as substitutes for other patients, this would permit their periodic inspiration without acquiring the liabilities that attach to reversals and failures.

Ritual substitution is not burdened by the drawbacks that plague reversals. Reversals can only justify a single repetition with small numbers of ritual patients, and if reversals become widespread, they inspire unflattering views of the gods. By contrast, ritual substitution faces no intrinsic limits on either the number of times a special agent ritual can be repeated with the same ritual patients or the number of ritual patients, who are eligible to participate in those repeated performances. Nor does ritual substitution impugn the reputations of the CI-agents involved.

Ritual substitution also avoids the problems that come with declarations of ritual failures. Even with full conceptual control, such declarations typically require an unflattering view of some ritual participants, whether it is the gods, the practitioners, or the patients. Ritual substitution does not. Moreover, unlike ritual failure, substitution is capable of supplying a motivation for repeating special agent rituals with the same ritual patients that is both systematic and prospective. Large groups of participants have religious approval for anticipating periodic repetition of special agent rituals in which they will serve as ritual patients. They will be the targets of the accompanying sensory pageantry, which will likely enhance their commitment to the religious system and their motivation to transmit it.

That, at least, holds for one prominent example among one of the world's fastest growing religions, viz., the ritual of the baptism of the dead in the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (LDS hereafter). (Note that if I am right about the advantages of periodically repeating special agent rituals with the same patients, then it is among fast growing religions that it makes sense to search.) The LDS church has become famous as a repository of genealogical information. This is not some idle pastime. The aim is to identify ancestors of LDS members (and others) in order that they may be individually baptized as members of the LDS church. Since the deceased are not available to attend their own baptisms, a subset of the current members of the LDS church, who obtain official documentation of their faithfulness (known as a "temple recommend"), serve periodically as substitutes in the ritual of the baptism of the dead. These LDS members periodically undergo baptisms in ornate baptismal fonts at LDS temples. They serve as substitute patients in a special agent ritual in which they are the target of the ritual's accompanying sensory pageantry. That they do this periodically in multiple baptisms with other faithful LDS members only increases their sense of the event's significance and of their commitment to their religious community.

By many measures, the LDS church is one of the world's fastest growing religions. Rodney Stark (1984; 2005) argues that we live in a period that is comparatively rare in human history, since we are witnessing what will prove to be the birth of a new world religion. Stark argues that across its first two centuries the LDS church has grown at least as fast and probably faster than the early Christian church did,³ which is to say at a rate of about 40% per decade (2005, 22-23). Stark acknowledges the pitfalls of straight line projections of any trend but argues that there are no obvious reasons to expect any diminution of LDS growth, especially in the light of its facility for flourishing in modern, secular environments (Stark 2005, chapters 5 and 7). Stark (1984) offered projections of LDS church growth, using official LDS church figures and projecting a growth rate of 30% per decade as his low estimate and 50% per decade as his high estimate. Stark emphasizes, though, that in 2003, nineteen years after his initial projections, the LDS church's growth had exceeded his high estimate (2005, 140-146). By the year 2080 the LDS church would number nearly 64 million on the low estimate and more than 267 million on the high estimate. Stark's point is that either number would qualify the LDS church as a major world faith.

Though it is, by no means, the only mechanism contributing to the LDS church's explosive growth, the line of analysis that I have offered suggests that there is ample reason to hold that the repetition of special agent rituals with the same ritual patients is a contributing factor. It is close to an ideal ritual mechanism, since it obtains all of the benefits (enhanced arousal, memory, commitment, and probability of transmission) of repeating a high pageantry, special agent ritual with large numbers of ritual patients while circumventing the problems presented by habituation and the Oscar Wilde Principle.

7. Special Agents in the Field

As Algy's comments indicate, repeating special agent rituals with the same patients requires a rationale. To be convincing that rationale will involve an account that appeals to one of three ritually relevant circumstances scouted in the previous section. First, the perceived need for such a rationale and, second, the penchant to offer a rationale in terms of either reversal, failure or substitution both arise as a direct result of the constraints that garden variety cognitive machinery for representing actions imposes on *all* religious ritual systems once CI-agents are implicated.

That point is critical for attempts to apply the theory of religious ritual competence in the field. This pair of features marks special agent rituals uniquely. Eliciting responses along these lines from informants even to hypothetical questions about ritual practices (e.g., "can this action be repeated with exactly the same persons serving in exactly the same roles?") suffices to distinguish special agent rituals from special instrument and special patient rituals in a way that is clear and relatively uncontaminated theoretically. The query involves little or no theoretical contamination, because neither fieldworkers nor informants need to know anything about the theory of religious ritual competence either to pose the question or to respond it. The criterion should also be fairly clear, since across *all* religious systems, the answer to the question above for special instrument and special patient rituals should be "yes" and the answer for special agent rituals should be either "no" or "no, unless . . ." followed by references to either ritual reversals, failures, or substitutions.

³ . . . a topic about which Stark also has considerable expertise – see Stark 1997.

It is the last of these that is the most intriguing theoretically. Algy finds himself in just this fix. He meets the formal demand for a rationale, but his substantive response is absurd in the light of the ground for his needing to offer the rationale in the first place. This constitutes evidence of Wilde's wry appreciation in "The Importance of Being Earnest" not only of the importance of being earnest but of the importance of being "Ernest."⁴

⁴ I wish to express my gratitude to Ted Slingerland and Mark Collard for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

Figure 1

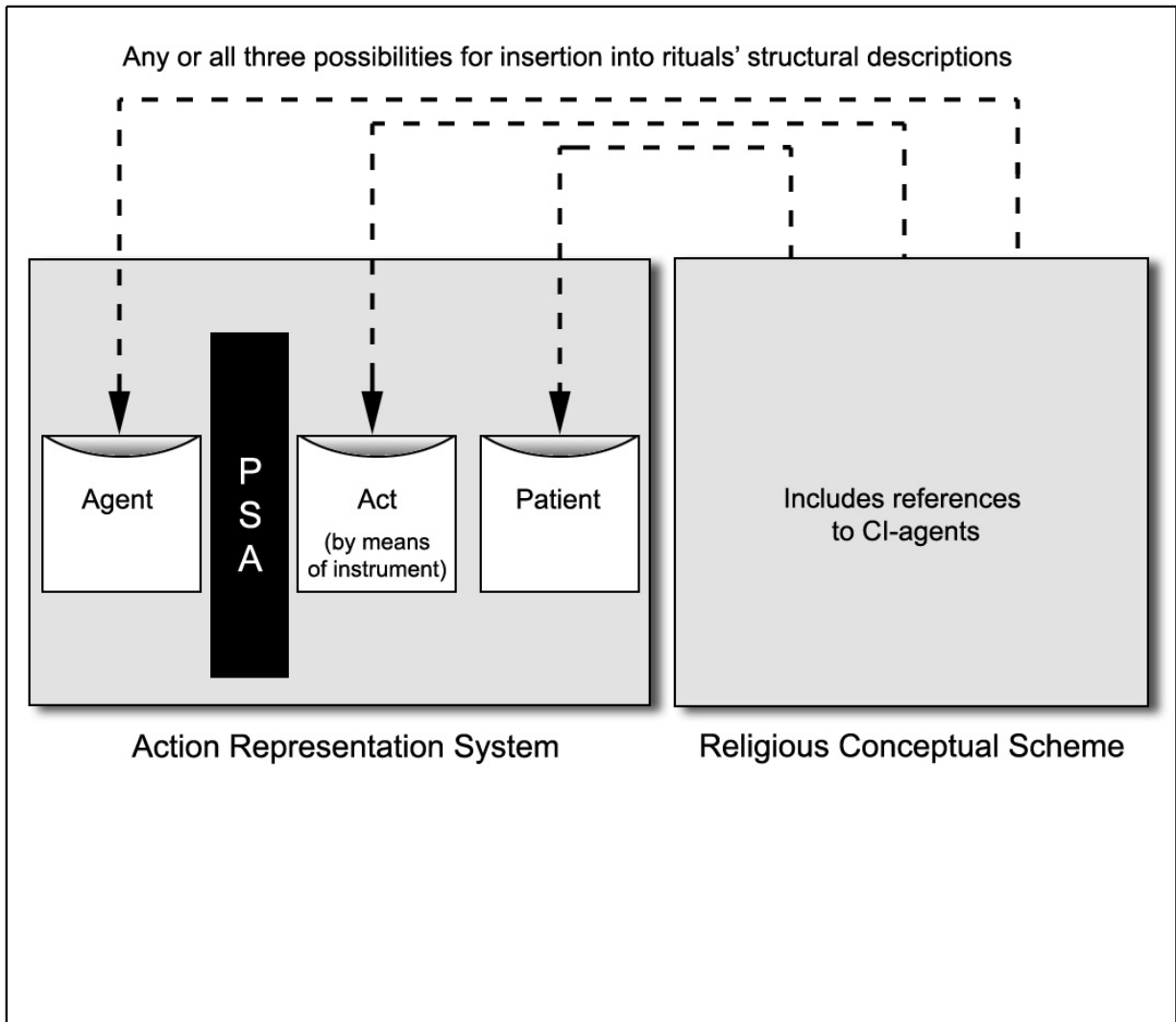


figure 1: possibilities for inserting representations of CI-agents into representations of religious ritual actions

Figure 2

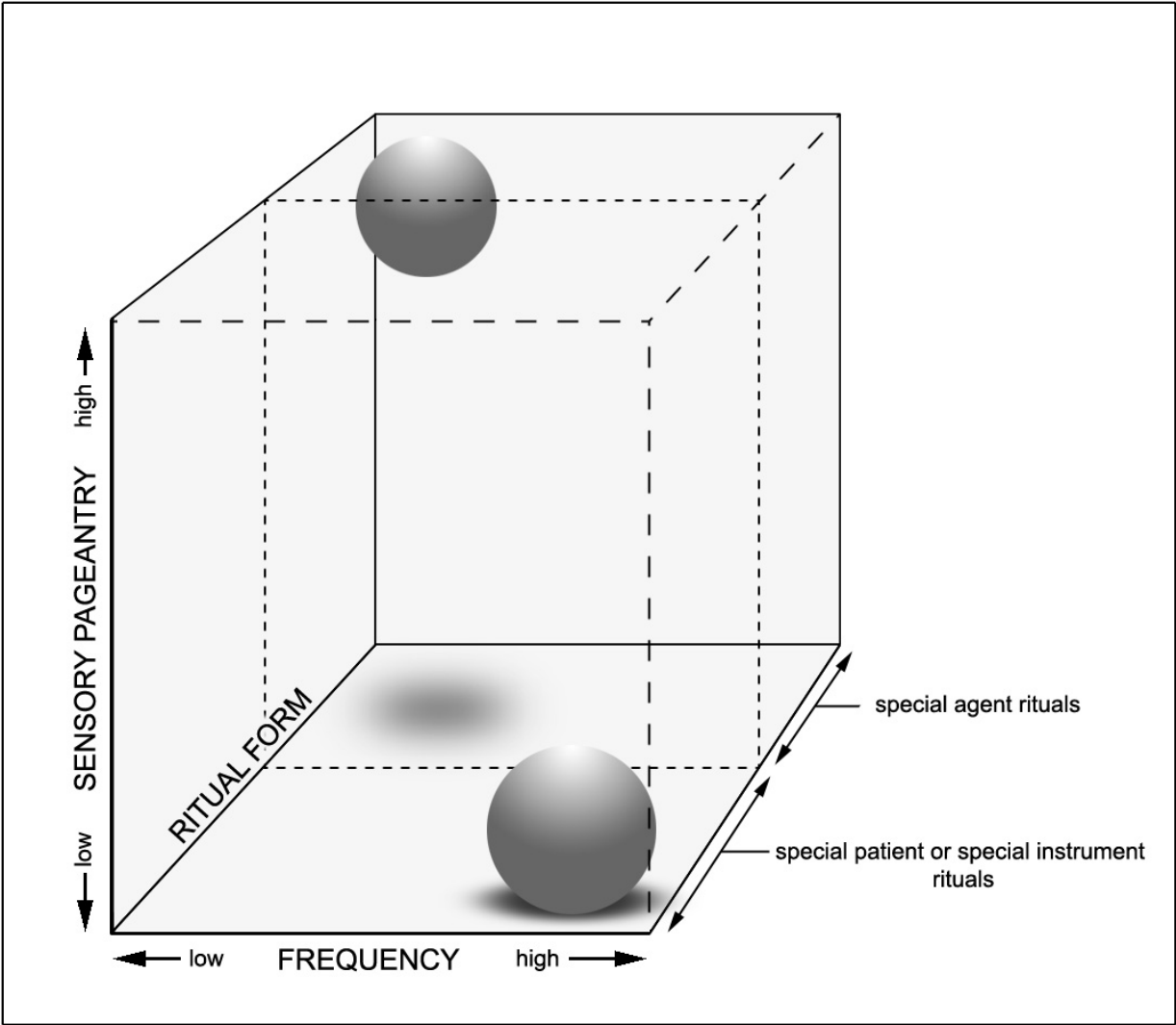


figure 2: two attractors in an abstract 3D space of possible ritual arrangements

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