

RITUALS VS. REALITY

A Critical Study on the Nature, Need and Dangers

Rituals in Human Society

***Note:** The materials offered in these jottings are rather large select from them what suits you best to build up your session.*

Introductory note :

- ✓ We are prone to be very critical about religious rites, and ceremonies. Quite often we condemn them as irrelevant.
- ✓ However, we are most uncritical and naive concerning secular rites and rituals.
- ✓ We have to be aware, however, that, willy nilly, all areas of human life, not only, the religious matters, but the social, economical, political, academic, artistic, recreational, domestic spheres are shot through with ritualism.
- ✓ Unawares, we accept rituals of all sorts most uncritically and as a matter of fact.
- ✓ We have to subject all rituals - secular and religious - to the same scrutiny and appraisal.
- ✓ Often enough, religious rites are branded as dishonest, pharisaical, showy, redundant and meaningless.
- ✓ We have to be aware, however, that all rites are symbolic expressions of truly human inner realities clamoring for external manifestation. Rites and rituals are needed. They are the means to express those inner ineffable realities.
- ✓ .The question to be explored is how genuine and meaningful are they.

Specific Intent of this Materials

- ✓ To alert the general public to the dangers of empty, dead and deceitful secular ritualism.
- ✓ To help the participants to be genuine and congruent in their social relationships as well as in their secular and civic life in its varied aspects,
- ✓ To open our eyes to the pervasive duplicity, falsehood and hypocrisy social rites may create in our lives.
- ✓ To free people from empty ritualism, rubber-stamp conformism, purely extrinsic formalism and crippling acquiescence with the fads and fashion of the day.
- ✓ To encourage people to dare to be genuine, to be themselves!
- ✓ To critically accept what is good in rites, rituals, social conventions, and customs and do away with much of the dross that has accumulated with the passage of time in our ritual-symbolic expressions.

Specific Uses of These Materials

- Conscientization seminars
- Civic, political and patriotic awareness sessions.
- Personal growth sessions.
- Recollections.
- Value clarification

- Catechism and moral science classes.
- Talks and instructions.
- Discussion groups.
- Personal reflection and examination of attitudes.

REQUIREMENTS

Writing material.

Blackboard

Introductory Session

Coming to know one another.

Singing hymns/bhajans, songs.

Opening prayer

Step 1. Introductory input

The moderator will introduce the topic of the day and give the participants a few hints on how to proceed in the next step.

Suggested ideas for the introductory Input

- In our daily lives, we perform many actions we can call "**rites and rituals**" such as shaking hands, singing the national anthem, using stereotyped formulae like "Bye bye! How do you do?" Etc.
- These actions are by their very nature repetitive.
- They are meant to express, to communicate to others something hidden deep down in our hearts. They are supposed to have a meaning, to signify something.
- They are necessary for us humans living in society to build relationships, and strengthen social ties.
- We could group them into various headings, such as social rites, political rites, military rites, academic rites, etc.
- In the next step of our session we shall meet in small groups of 4 each and try to compile a list of such rites for further study and reflection.

Step 2. Small Groups work.

Brain storming. Compiling a list of Rites.

Divide the participants into groups of four.

Each group will choose a secretary. He will write down the ideas that will emerge from the group.

The work to be done in the group will be as follows

By brain storming compile a list - as exhaustive as possible - of the many secular rites prevalent in society in daily life.

Once the list of rites is mentioned, they will be grouped under the following headings:

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|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Social Rites: | f.i. Shaking hands, salutations, protocol, etc. |
| 2. Political Rites | f.i. Saluting the flag, playing the national anthem, etc. |
| 3. Military Rites | f.i. Insignia of office, decorations, marches, parades, etc. |

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| 4. Academic Rites | f.i. Scholarships, diplomas, degrees, etc. |
| 5. World of Sports | f.i. Sports meets, cups, trophies, etc. |
| 6. Judiciary Rites: | f.i. Court rituals, procedures, etc. |
| 7. .Sundry rites | f.i. In the world of business, office procedures, banking, etc. |

Step 4. General Session. Final List. Discussion-cum-input

Final List Compilation

- ✓ The secretaries of the small groups will read their respective lists of rites and rituals.
- ✓ The moderator or someone else will record on the blackboard the items mentioned by the secretaries.
- ✓ Thus a final list of rites and rituals existing in society will be compiled.

Discussion-cum-input

The moderator will initiate a discussion based on the items recorded on the board. Along with the discussion he will give an input on the topics suggested below

Thoughts for the input

The nature, variety and function of rites and rituals in human life.

- Going over the list of rites written on the board, make the participants realize how many and variegated are the rites we use every day, nay every hour of the day.
- Rouse their awareness to the fact that without rite and ritual, social intercourse and social life would not be possible.
- Without rite and ritual we could not relate to one another - language itself is a rite!
- We could not build a society, a community; we would not able to express ourselves.
- All our conversations and transactions are ritualized.
- Rites and rituals change according to culture and culture, country and country, but their nature and their necessary use is the same for all.
- In passing, you may mention that rites and rituals are equally rich, varied and essential in the world of religions.
- In fact, as social intercourse is not possible without social rites, likewise, **prayer, cult and worship** - which constitute the outer expression of religion - would not have existed in our world. Without rite and ritual no religion is possible!

Dangers in the Use of Rites and Rituals

- ✓ The Dangers to be considered are:
 - 1) Sacralization.
 - 2) Absolutization.
 - 3) Empty ritualism.
 - 4) Complacency, false security.
 - 5) Pride, pharisaical attitudes, superiority complex.
- ✓ *Take the above mentioned dangers singly. Discuss them and give as many examples as possible.*
- ✓ *Ask the audience to help you find examples.*
- ✓ *We give a few below*

a) Sacralization : i.e. *Investing our rituals with a mystique or aura of spirituality;*

Examples:

- Political ideologies may turn into a kind of secular religion. (*Communism, democracy, socialism, globalization, liberalization, etc.*)
- National sovereignties and national symbols may end up "idolizing" one's country. (*Nazism, Fascism, Zionism, Hindutwa, etc.*)
- Political symbols may take on a religious coloring (*The swastika, the sickle and hammer. Etc*)
- Secular history may take on a "sacred" character. (*Religious wars, crusades, jihads, etc.*)

b) Absolutization : i.e. *Rites and rituals stop being means and become ends.*

Examples

- They say that patriotic citizens should to be ready to lay down their lives for the honor of our country, for our flag, for our country's integrity, for our national boundaries!
- Surely, one should be ready to die for the good of one's countrymen, for justice, for the wellbeing and equality in the land; but not for a "piece of cloth", not for some imaginary boundary line lost up in the mountains or down in the depths of the sea!
- In the army, bravery may become more an end in itself to be rewarded with medals and insignia, than a means to defend justice and right!
- In the wedding ceremony - dowry, gifts, celebrations, receptions, banquets, social conventions, etc. - becomes more important than the happiness of the newly - weds.
- In sports, the end is to get the trophy, not to play a good game, to win or lose honorably, or to show "sportsmanship".

c) Empty Ritualism. *Meaningless Rituals. i.e. the symbols are there, but emptied of their original meaning,*

Examples :

- Garlands, coconuts, kunkus, ritual presents at ceremonies, birthday presents..
- Greeting formulae - "How do you do?" "Salaam," "Seeing you again" "Bye-bye", "Congratulations", "Many Happy Returns"
- Honorific signs - Bows, salutes, salaams, namastes.
- Social conventions - Allowing ladies and V.I.Ps to step first, Standing while talking to a superior, etc.
- Do, all these rituals and many other things we do, make any sense to us? Do we do them because they have a meaning for us or just because they are what everybody has to do?

d) Complacency - *false security: i.e. we think we are polite, kind, patriotic, etc. because we have ritually expressed politeness, kindness, patriotism and what not!*

It may be just the other way round!

Examples:

- We may think ourselves to be very patriotic because we salute the flag, sing the national anthem, celebrate national feasts and speak loudly of our national glories,

while, in truth, we are doing a disservice to the nation by black-marketeering, tax evasion, bribery and corruption!

- We may boast of being very capable and highly qualified because we have gone through the ritual of exams, promotions, graduation and paper degrees. And yet, we may be most inefficient, ignorant and incapable of holding the position we are assigned to.
- We may pride ourselves on being very charitable because we give alms to the poor and support charitable works while all the time we exploit our servants, workers and employees and indulge in shady business.

e) Pride - pharisaic attitudes - superiority complex. i.e. we may think ourselves better than those who do not observe rites and rituals.

Examples:

- We judge the reality by the rites and rituals, f.i. I can be very patriotic even though I do not salute the flag.
- I can be very efficient without diplomas and certificates, etc.
- We may think ourselves to be very friendly persons because we shake hands and indulge in all sorts of salaams and pranams while in reality we are not.
- We might think ourselves to be more capable than others because we hold more degrees.
- We might despise others of lower caste, or with less honorific titles, while in reality they may be worthier than we.
- We might scorn our companions and consider them ducks in sports because we can produce more certificates and trophies.

Step 5 Let us be Critical, Assertive and Genuine

Be critical and rational in matters of Rite and Ritual.

- Try to find meaning.
- Do not accept opinions as facts.
- Do not fall prey to the latest fads.
- Question everything. Why? Why?

Be Assertive: Be yourself

- Follow your conscience. Stand by your convictions and perceptions.
- Do not follow the crowd. Do not be sheepish..
- Do not submit to any rite or ritual for its own sake!

Be Genuine :

- Express what you feel. Do not pretend, or feign.
- Let all your actions be true manifestations of what you truly think and feel.
- Be aware of what you feel; then, search for the right sign or symbol to express it, and express it.
- Stop all empty ritualism.

Personalization and Personal Prayer

- The participants should be given some time for personal reflection and prayer.
- Give all a copy of the "Reflection Questionnaire Form" here below.

REFLECTION QUESTIONNAIRE FORM.

Instructions

Prayerfully, go over the 4 points below.

Reflect and examine yourself.

Jot down your reflections and findings.

1. In the use of rites and rituals, have you been critical and rational or you easily have accepted them without much reflection?. What do you intend doing about it?
2. Are you honest in the use of rites and rituals? Do you really mean what they signify? What will you do in future?
3. Can you be assertive? If you cannot find meaning in some of the rituals you performed, will you have the courage to give them up? ?
4. In your daily living, do you rather follow the crowd or your conscience? What will you do about it
5. Ordinarily, are you aware of your feelings? Can you honestly express them in a non-challenging way?

Step 7. Closing Group Prayer

- ✓ Close the sessions with a participative shared group-prayer.
You may base your prayer session on the parable of "**The Pharisee and the Tax-collector**". (*Lk. 18/9-14*).
- ✓ The parable may be acted with adaptations and in a modern setting.
For instance: Choose three pairs of participants to act the parable.
 - One pair will act the rich and the poor citizen,
 - the second pair the educated and the uneducated citizen,
 - and the third pair the reputable and the disreputable citizen.
- ✓ The pairs will act by turns. First, the rich one will stand in the middle of the hall, while the poor one will sit in a corner away from the rest.
The rich one will start his prayer aloud: "I thank you Lord because I am rich. I contribute to the welfare and prosperity of the country, etc... I am not like the beggar over there... useless, a parasite... etc."
- ✓ After this pair, will come the "educated and uneducated" pair and finally the "reputable and the disreputable" pair. Each of the members of the pairs acting out their respective prayer stances on similar lines.

Note well:

Those acting as "Pharisees", proud and full of conceit, will keep stressing all the "ritual" things they do for the country; (*paying taxes, respecting law and order, Honoring the flag, singing the national anthem, keeping the traffic regulations, etc.*)

Those acting as "Publicans", in all sincerity and humility, will keep stressing all the "real" things they do for the country and for which they are despised and exploited by the "respectable" citizens: *sweating from dawn to dusk, building roads and railways, constructing cities, working in the mines, tilling the fields, producing crops, etc.*)

Let the whole scenario bring out very forcefully the point as to who are the real, hard-working, productive, faithful citizens of the country! (*Those who scrupulously stick to political ritualism or those who slog and die for the country???*)

Closing:

- After the role-playing the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, a short analysis and critique of it will follow.
- Get all the participants involved in sharing, discussion and spontaneous prayer.
- Intersperse the prayer session with hymns, bhajans and readings.

New Testament Quotes Suitable for the Prayer Session.

Mt. 15/1-9	The teaching of the Ancestors.
Mk. 7/14-23	Things that make a person unclean.
Lk. 11/37-42	Washing hands and other rites
Mt. 23/1-12	Jesus warns the Pharisees.
Mt. 23/13-28	Jesus condemns hypocrisy and complacency.

APPENDIX Activities

If you have the time, do not skip this step, it is very effective.
The best time for the activities is the afternoon hours.

A. Preparation of the Activities

Each group of four will prepare an activity to exemplify some of the dangers of ritualism. If there are more than six groups of four, re-adjust the number of participants per group. Try not to have more than six groups.

Each group, by means of

- a play
- a roleplay
- a mime
- a puppet show,
- a shadow play, or
- a pantomime, etc.

Will present a real-life situation in which the dangers of ritualism are manifest.

Encourage the participants to be real, critical and even comic, sarcastic and ironic. The presentations of various situations may be done as sort of a parody of reality.

B. Presentation of the Activities.

When the groups are ready they will present their activities to the house. The moderator, after each presentation, will lead the group through a short analysis, evaluation and discussion of the main issues raised by the presentation.