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# Teaching Ritual

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## 5

# Experience, Purpose, Pedagogy, and Theory: Ritual Activities in the Classroom

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The day after what we now call 9/11, I was scheduled to teach the second session of my class "Religion, the Environment, and Contemplative Practice." I had scheduled a three-hour class meeting in the Crum Woods, a forest preserve adjacent to the Swarthmore campus, where, in addition to discussing the assigned readings, the class would begin a series of group meditation and ritual practices that I had envisioned for this particular day in the semester. Under any circumstances, asking students to practice various meditation disciplines in an open classroom environment, in full view of their peers, is a risky proposition. But to ask them to take this risk immediately following such a traumatic event as 9/11 felt especially ill-timed. So I e-mailed class members before our meeting to see what they wanted to do; I assumed they would prefer to cancel class and make it up later. To my surprise, the students wanted to go ahead with the class as planned.

### Experience

We first met in our regular classroom and then, without speaking, proceeded into the Crum Woods as a group, practicing a kind of silent walking meditation. Along the way, I asked each member of the group to experience being "summoned" by a particular life form found in the Crum Woods—red fox, clod of dirt, water strider, flatworm, gray squirrel, red oak, skunk cabbage, and so on—and then to reimagine themselves as becoming that life. After the walk through the woods,

we gathered in a circle, thirty or so students and me, within a grove of sycamore trees in a meadow next to a creek.

At this juncture, I asked the students to use the first person in conveying a message to our group from the perspective of the individual life form they had assumed. Naturally, I explained that this was a voluntary exercise; no one should feel compelled to speak if he or she did not want to. If you imagine yourself, for example, as a brook trout or morning dove or dragonfly living in and around the Crum Creek, with the creek threatened by suburban storm water runoff and other problems, what would you like to say to this circle of human beings? This group activity is a variation on a deep-ecology, Neopagan ritual called "A Council of All Beings," in which participants enact a mystical oneness with the flora and fauna in an area by speaking out in the first person on behalf of the being or place with which they have chosen to identify (Seed et al. 1988; Hill 2000). A Council of All Beings ritual enables members of the group to speak "as" and "for" other natural beings, imaginatively feeling what it might be like to be bacterium, bottle-nosed dolphin, alligator, old growth forest, or gray wolf. Participants "become" this or that animal or plant or natural place and then share a message to the other human persons in the circle. The purpose of such a council is to foster compassion for other life forms by ritually bridging the differences that separate human beings from the natural world.

In principle, this sort of group activity seemed a good idea for inaugurating a new class format that I had learned about from colleagues, one that grafted earthen meditation practices onto an academic religious studies foundation (Gottlieb 1999: 33-58). As we sat quietly, waiting for someone in the circle to speak "as" his or her adopted life form, it became awkwardly clear to me that no one was ready to take on this sort of task. Shocked and traumatized by the previous day's events in New York, I silently wondered how I could expect my students to perform a strange ritual openly, especially since it appeared that some were, understandably, uncomfortable with "becoming" other life forms in the first place. Some of the students were shy, of course, and others did not want to do or say anything that might embarrass them in a group setting. As the minutes went by, I was certain I had been asking too much of them. After a half hour, no one had spoken, and I could feel the perspiration running down the inside of my shirt. I had been preparing this class for months, yet now I felt I should have proposed a more conventional alternative to a Council of All Beings ritual, at least in light of the sad events at the World Trade Center the day before.

Then something happened. "I am blue heron," said one member of the class. "I glide quietly through the creek in the early morning looking for something to eat. I break the calm of the late afternoon with my great wings as I take flight over the water and travel to new destinations. Humans, keep this watershed clean so that I can grace this place for years to come."

Soon other life forms spoke. "I am red-backed salamander. I live under rocks and deep down in the moist, fertile ground. I need the protection of this

forest to dig for food and raise my young. I am worried that contaminants in the soil will make us sick to the point of death. Please care for the earth so that I can live."

Another voice: "I am monarch butterfly. I migrate through the open meadows in your forest looking for the milkweed plant on which I lay my eggs and my caterpillars feed. I brighten your day with my beautiful orange and black wings; I help other plants grow and pollinate with my nectar here and there. Please do not pave over the meadows and cut down the milkweed that I need for my survival."

And another: "I am black walnut tree. I add to the protective canopy of this forest. My heartwood is favored for your furniture making. The large nuts I drop to the ground are food for squirrels and mice and other forest creatures. I purify the air by absorbing the carbon dioxide you produce, and I produce oxygen so that everyone can breathe. Protect this forest and all its inhabitants."

The litany continued: "I am lichen . . .," "I am holly bush . . .," "I am crayfish . . .," "I am forest wildflower . . .," "I am worm . . .," "I am mourning dove . . .," "I am furry caterpillar . . .," "I am tulip tree . . .," and so forth.

After that long silence, the members of the class shared their eco-stories in polyphony of proclamations, soft-spoken entreaties, tears, and laughter. I feared the initial silence had signaled too much unease with the group ritual. Now I realized that the time of silence at the beginning of class allowed participants to gather their thoughts in a new vein, and discern what they should say as they assumed the identity of the particular life form who had originally summoned them during our forest walk.

Like the pattern of puzzle-like pieces of bark flaking off the trunk of the sycamore tree next to me, I became encircled by a medley of voices that reminded me and the others of our obligations to care for the forest. Sitting cross-legged in the open meadow, amid the occasional yellow jackets buzzing low as they foraged for food, my skin felt warmed by the mid-afternoon sunlight; the low gurgle of the creek nearby provided background music for our ritual gathering. Soon the class would end, and we would be back on campus, far from the forest. Yet for a moment here, we enacted our identities as fellow and sister members of this forest preserve in communion with the other life forms found there. We felt ourselves embedded in a sacred hoop greater than ourselves. As human citizens of a wider biotic community, we found ourselves surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who were calling us to our responsibilities for preserving the woods.

### Purpose

The use of ritual in my teaching at Swarthmore stemmed from a Contemplative Practices Fellowship that I received in 2000 from the American Council

of Learned Societies. The aim of these ACLS fellowships was to encourage university faculty to use nontraditional modes of active, contemplative learning to stimulate greater cognitive and emotional growth among students (Zajonc 2002). My fellowship enabled me to study and then incorporate ritual practices into a redesigned version of the religion and ecology class described above. My goal was to use classic sacred texts along with a variety of nonsectarian rites to show students how the world's religions, myths, and rituals have shaped humanity's fundamental outlook on the environment since ancient times. Beyond formal academic inquiry into the relationship between religion and ecology, however, the course had an unconventional practical aim: to enable students to consider adopting new insights into how they can live in harmony with their natural environments by means of fundamentally *experiential* contact with the actual sources of the ancient earth wisdom within various spiritual traditions.

The existential goal of this course, therefore, was for students to cultivate inner self-awareness and outward compassion for other life forms in a dialogical, interdisciplinary, and multireligious context. Ritual practices were to help class members learn strategies for coordinating the inner landscape of the heart with the outer landscape of the earth. The thesis of the course held that the world's environmental crisis is, at its core, a spiritual crisis because it is human beings' deep "ecocidal" dispositions toward nature that are the cause of the earth's continued degradation (Wallace 2005: 26-33). Our lives run opposite the crucial insight in the American Indian proverb, "The frog does not drink up the pond in which it lives." Regarding the environmental crisis as a spiritual crisis, this course sought to recover the biocentric convictions within different religious traditions as valuable resources for countering the utilitarian attitudes toward earth community now dominating the mind-set of the global marketplace we inhabit (Loy 2002).

Course topics included ecological thought in Western philosophy, theology, and biblical studies; the role of Asian religious thought in forging an ecological worldview; the value of Amerindian and Euro-American nature writing for environmental awareness; public policy debates concerning vegetarianism along with the antitoxins movement; and the contemporary relevance of ecofeminism, deep ecology, neopaganism, and wilderness activism.

In addition to requiring traditional writing and exam assignments, I asked students to perform ritual practices in the classroom, maintain contemplative journals, and do weekly field work focused on environmental renewal in the wider community. The purpose of these alternative learning activities was to promote liberatory cognitive development through an experiential understanding of certain aspects of spiritual life, on the one hand, and community-based social and civic responsibility, on the other. The degree to which religious rites and social service, as exercises in "secular spirituality," can function as positive forces in personal and communal well-being is much debated in

ritual theory and religious studies (Van Ness 1996, 2004). Scholars have noted the tendency of many rituals to routinize regimes of power that control individual expression and repress social dissent (McWhorter 2004). While the relation of ritual to power is inherently dialectical (Bell 1992: 171–223), the salutary potential of ritual to productively enable self-transformation and the reordering of social relations has also been consistently documented (Driver 1998: 166–191; Grimes 1990: 145–157). I used ritual learning and service learning to enhance students' personal and interpersonal development in my religion and ecology class.

First, I introduced a series of quasi-religious practices in order to challenge students' inherited meaning structures, their basic worldviews, and open new possibilities for being in the world. In an open and nonsectarian environment, I made use of classroom-appropriate contemplative disciplines to deepen, elucidate, and sometimes challenge the insights gleaned from class discussions and the readings. Influenced by Ronald Grimes's establishment of a ritual studies laboratory at Wilfred Laurier University (Grimes 1990: 109–144), a spiritually inflected *practicum* was led by me, a guest facilitator, a student, or small group of students. We explored a selective variety of contemplative practices in this class: neopagan animal bonding ritual, Christian *lectio divina* meditative reading, Jewish prayer book contemplation, Zen Buddhist mindless sitting meditation, and Lakota medicine wheel ritual. Mindful walking and sitting, breathing disciplines, strategies for nonviolent relationships with plants and animals, nature observation exercises, and adapted individual vision quests supplemented other spiritually oriented rituals and were designed to aid the course's practical aims—that is, to assist students in their own understanding of how ritual can mediate more benign relationships of compassion and experiences of self-discovery.

Second, I also asked each student to commit herself or himself to a community-based fieldwork project and maintain a contemplative journal as a reflective record of her or his field activities. The fieldwork project focuses on some activity devoted to earth healing—for example, community development work, volunteering in a local arboretum, maintaining an urban garden, or working for social change in environmentally degraded areas. The journals sought to integrate personal musings, reactions to class readings and ritual activities, and reflections on field experiences. Traditional writing, artistic media, and Web page hypertext documents have all been used for the contemplative journaling. Service learning studies show that reflection about community-based education that is integrated into classes through regular discussion and written analysis increases students' cognitive development and capacity for citizenship (Eyler and Giles 1999: 187–208). Adapting metaphorically the vocabulary of Western mystical traditions, I have encouraged students to view the journal as their own interior chronicles of their "soul's journey" into itself and then back out again into service in the world.

### Pedagogy

I had long wanted to revitalize my teaching by combining intellectual inquiry and ritual practice, but it took the "imprimatur" of the American Council of Learned Societies' Contemplative Practice Fellowship to ease my anxieties about the legitimacy of introducing quasi-religious activities into the classroom. My primary reservation about performance work in my pedagogy has always been the fear that I would be perceived as breaching the gulf that divides intellectual inquiry from religious practice (see this debate in Miller, Patton, and Webb 1994).

Understandably, many scholars of religion argue against blurring the lines of distinction that separate the academic *study* of religion from religious *practice* in order to secure the credibility of religious studies as an intellectually rigorous and ideologically nonsectarian mode of disciplinary inquiry (McCutcheon 1997; Wiebe 1999). The mantra that underlies this way of thinking is familiar to many of us: we do not *teach* religion, rather we teach *about* religion in as objective an environment as we know how to create. In no way, according to this viewpoint, should the wall of partition that separates the study of religion and the practice of religion be undermined; otherwise our hard-won standing in the academy as religious studies scholars would be compromised. Again, we would be seen as faith-based proponents of sectarian worldviews—theologians in disguise, as it were.

In many respects, I am sympathetic to this concern as an important hedge against the misperception of religious studies as a catechetical exercise interested in the indoctrination of students into particular forms of belief. If academic religious studies were to shade over into confessional theological studies, with classroom ritual used to inculcate particular religious persuasions, considerable confusion would arise about the important, if relative, distinction between the academic (nonsectarian) institutions' study of religion, on the one hand, and denominational college or seminary education, on the other.

Nevertheless, with this boundary question in mind, I think that it is possible to teach academic religious studies and use classroom ritual practices without sacrificing the intellectual integrity of the learning environment. Moreover, I have come to the conclusion that performance-based activities are necessary and integral tools in teaching the student, as a whole person, to better understand the depth and power of religious life and thought. To accomplish this end, I have needed to be methodologically clear about the nature and the purpose of the ritual practices in which I ask students to participate. Over time I have settled on the following criteria for developing student-centered rites that are, I believe, academically appropriate and intellectually enriching in a public classroom setting.

*While classroom rituals provide genuine experiential insight into the meaning of religion, they should be practiced in a manner that is both culturally sensitive yet theologically vague.* Performance activities rooted in particular cultural traditions provide students with a mediated experience of time-honored practices that enhance and deepen text-based learning. Engaging in a ritual practice borrowed from different mythopoetic cultures offers students a lived understanding of the significance of religious experience. But these practices should be taught to students only after the instructor determines which rituals can or cannot be appropriately imported into a secular classroom environment. Simple Buddhist sitting or walking meditation can be usefully relocated from a monastic to a public setting, but rituals that are sacred to the identity of a religion's devotees—such as a sweat lodge ceremony in Native American traditions or celebration of the Eucharist in Christian communities—would not make good candidates for altered use in a classroom setting.

The use of ritual language needs to be carefully edited to guard against possible misunderstanding by the uninitiated. Generally speaking, I make a point to exclude the iteration of theological beliefs that are not essential for a thoughtful, if partial, understanding of religious life through active, body-centered practices. It is not necessary to repeat the many names and attributes of the biblical God or chant the appellations of various Indian avatars to practice particular exercises in mindfulness drawn from the Jewish, Christian, and Hindu traditions, respectively. When avoiding the use of confessional theology in classroom rituals, however, the temptation for some scholars is to rely on seemingly "neutral" ritual practices, often borrowed from self-avowedly non-theological New Age traditions that do not entail the theistic beliefs that are integral to the monotheistic religions of the West, for example. But even quasi-religious practices are rooted in a theological (or a-theological) heritage of one sort or another, even if that heritage is antireligious, antitheological, or anti-theistic. The best way to handle the question of theological language in ritual practice is to shape the cognitive dimensions of the classroom ritual so that the activity gestures toward, but does not invoke, the belief system that animates any ritual practice.

*Classroom rituals should be practiced as analogous to a laboratory or studio learning experience, not as a liturgical exercise in inculcating confessional beliefs.* This point may seem obvious to scholars of religion, but for students it can be unnerving to perform a modified Native American sacred hoop ritual and not feel correspondingly obligated to accept the religious worldview that has historically grounded this practice. I make the point with my classes that just as in laboratory sessions in biology or chemistry, on the one hand, or studio classes in art and music, on the other, a student learns more by actually practicing the discipline in question; so also in religious studies it can be intellectually enriching to engage in ritual practices, while still putting aside any personal subscription to the religious beliefs that underlie such practices. A studio art

major learns about ceramics both by studying history and technique and by actually throwing a pot on a wheel and creating art herself. By the same token, by participating in classroom-appropriate ritual practices, students develop a more complex and nuanced understanding of the experiential dimensions of religion than what is available to them through textual studies alone.

*Classroom rituals should be regarded as integral to the learning experience, but they should not be practiced by students who have personal objections to them.* Academic ritual practices are an important exercise in active learning and should not be viewed as an occasional supplement to the essential activities of a class which, traditionally understood, entail classroom discussion, the reading of texts, and written work for exams and essay assignments. Rather, the use of ritual exercises underscores for students the importance of an experiential understanding of the performative dimensions of religious life. Through ritual, students can grasp something of the lived spirituality that characterizes particular symbolic communities. Nevertheless, at the outset of each term, I explain to students that this class is optional and that although religious and quasi-religious practices will be featured in this class as an exercise in learning-by-doing, students are not required to participate in particular activities if they find such activities objectionable. I do not require observant Jewish students to attend class during the high Jewish holidays. Likewise, I have colleagues in biology who do not require all laboratory students to perform dissections when particular students voice moral or religious objections to such procedures. Active learning rounds out academic religious studies by providing guided access to different aspects of the affective dimensions of religious belief and practice. Yet such access for students is best offered in the spirit of an invitation, not as a requirement that might be uncomfortable.

### Theory

I have experimented with a variety of theoretical resources to better introduce and ground classroom performance practice in contemporary ritual theory. For example, I have used the work of René Girard, a literary critic and social theorist who analyzes ritual performance as the mainspring of cultural formation. Born in 1923, he is currently emeritus professor of French language and literature at Stanford University. In brief, Girard posits an innate capacity and drive to imitate the desires of others—what he calls *mimesis*—as a fundamental clue to understanding human nature, religion, and culture. Mimesis is the basic human impulse to copy what another person finds valuable and worthwhile; it is the instinct to acquire as one's own what is deemed desirable by another. Though mimesis is a natural feature of human subjectivity, more often than not it leads to tragic consequences. As the primitive desire to form one's identity in relation to another person, it is alternately the mainspring of

social conflict as well as the origin of humankind's potential to form positive, lasting relationships with others. In this vein, I consider Girard's study of the human being via a series of stages and then analyze the relevance of Girard's project to understanding the value of ritual in the religious studies classroom.

### *Mediated Desire*

A human being enters consciousness already overdetermined by the desires and expectations of its immediate caregivers and wider social group. As self-consciousness increases, human beings develop an ever-widening sense of self-centered on their developing feeling of ownership for what they consider to be their innermost hopes and needs. The first stage, then, in Girard's theory of the human condition is an analysis of humans' *mis*understanding of themselves as beings with innate desires. An initial problem develops because the subject misinterprets its desires as "natural" and "self-evident," yet it inevitably finds itself bound to a system of values and preferences that it neither understands nor is able to extricate itself from. Since the subject considers the generated needs and desires actually communicated to the subject by another to be self-generated, it suffers an existence in which, at least on one level, it is fundamentally self-deceived. At the wellspring of its existence, the self is opaque to the sources and motives of its own actions. Thus, for Girard, everything that generates the culture of a particular social group, from tastes in food to codes of behavior and divisions of labor, operates within the space of subconscious mimetic desire (Girard 1987: 3-47, 283-447).

### *Loss of Differences*

The next stage concerns the power of mimesis, now referred to by Girard as *acquisitive* mimesis, to blur distinctions and merge identities whenever the subject becomes successful in obtaining the object of its desire. As long as attainment of the other's desires remains a distant and unreachable goal, there is no conflict between the subject and the mediator-of-desire, namely, that other person. But once the desired object is almost in the grasp of the subject, the potential for conflict arises. Now the mediator who had modeled attachment to the craved object becomes a rival who is seen to guard the subject from obtaining the object. Both parties see themselves in the other—imitating each other in a merging of their separate identities; the eventual result is a concomitant loss of distinctions between self and other, disciple and model (Girard 1977: 119-168).

### *The Scapegoat Mechanism*

The merging of the separate identities into a single desire for a common object generates a loss of differences; this loss provokes an aggressive and,

inevitably, a violent reassertion of the previous order in the interest of stable personal and communal identity formation. Therefore, in the third stage in Girard's analysis, acquisitive mimetic frenzy leads to a collapse of interpersonal and social distinctions, which in turn provokes reciprocal violence in order to shore up the threatened social structure. If everyone were allowed to carry out their mimetic desires unchecked, the system of differences, the hierarchy of values, the scaffold of distinctions that support and organize cultural identities would break down; the result would be social chaos. As Girard writes, "Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another's throats" (Girard 1977: 49).

In terms of group psychology, the gut-level response to the debilitating threat of unregulated desire is to turn a blind eye to the real cause of the problem, the raw compulsion to acquire the object desired by another, and impute to some unprotected "other" the cause of the community's dissolution into an undifferentiated and disordered state. This renders the chosen other a target for the community's rage over its loss of cultural order. The other has become the victim, the scapegoat, of the group's disintegration insofar as it functions to divert collective violence to itself and *away* from the real cause, the mimetic crisis. The solution to mimetic crises, Girard argues, is the prophylactic of scapegoating violence. In order to save itself from the inevitable corrosion of mimetic disorder, the community must periodically plunge itself into a paroxysm of violence toward a "guilty" scapegoat. Mimetic, imitative rivalry threatens to tear apart a society's order of differences and values unless it is regulated by a common agreement that some marginal member of the community has caused the problem, not everyone's unconscious and insatiable drive to imitate the other and possess what the other values. This subconscious agreement generates a temporary unity in the community of newly formed "persecutors" and temporarily resolves the mimetic crisis until the next rivalrous relationship gathers steam (Girard 1977: 250-318).

#### *Religion Justifies Violence*

The fourth stage of Girard's analysis of ritual and social life concerns the double valence of the victim: the scapegoat is now simultaneously regarded as both the *cause* of the community's disintegration and the *origin* of its new-found unity. "The return to peace and order is ascribed to the same cause as the earlier troubles—to the victim himself," Girard writes (1986: 55). This hard-won unity provides the basis and justification for the institutions, prohibitions, myths, and rituals that constitute the culture and religion of a particular group. Culture has its origins, therefore, in the mechanism that creates and destroys the scapegoat. All major cultural institutions function as incul-

cators of the myths, rituals, and prohibitions that undergird this way of social functioning. Political and legal institutions provide the routinized legitimization structures that reward and punish group members for obeying or disobeying the customs and laws that regulate the social order. And religious institutions operate to provide the curative sacrificial rites that recall the "good" violence that formed the community in the first place and prevented its descent into the "bad" violence of confusion and chaos. Girard argues that "religion in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence" (1977: 23). In the Girardian framework, religious performance and religious ritual, along with most other cultural practices, operate both to render opaque and to legitimate the generative violence that founded the community. Religion functions to control further outbreaks of violence by deflecting the danger toward the "guilty other" who stands in place of the community's intractable mimetic problems.

#### *Critically Appropriating Girard's Model of Mimesis and Religion*

Girard argues that religion has its origins in sacrificial violence, which myths, rituals, and prohibitions serve to camouflage and justify. The founding unanimous outcry against the victim is the mainspring of cultural formation, and even modern society and current religious practice operate according to the code of the victim mechanism, a mechanism rooted in past events of mimetic conflict that engenders new rationalizations for further violence. Nevertheless, Girard's indictment of culturally mediated violence is not a generic indictment of all culture and religion as such. In fact, it is precisely at the point where his social theory appears to be most damning in its scope that he identifies an alternative range of mimetic and ritual practices that are relatively immune from the founding of religious rites based on scapegoats.

Girard maintains that there are actually two modes of mimetic expression that define the human condition: acquisitive mimesis, which leads to rivalrous imitation of others and eventual violence, and non-acquisitive mimesis, which imitates the healthy desires of others and does not descend into the whirlpool of violence and retribution. "On one side are the prisoners of violent imitation," he writes, "which always leads to a dead end, and on the other are the adherents of non-violent imitation, who will meet with no obstacle" (Girard 1996: 18). At another point he flatly declares, "Mimetic desire is intrinsically good" (64). Healthy mimesis opens up the self to the other without the drive to own or control the other; it is guided by the other's desires and actions with an eye toward the mutual welfare of both self and other, not the domination of the other by the self. Non-rivalrous cultural imitation is communion with, not possession of, the other. Non-conflictual mimesis is positive, transformative desire to be like the other, to find oneself in and through the other, all the

while being vigilant to defuse the potential conflicts that come with imitative group behavior.

In my use of classroom ritual, I have found both aspects of Girardian mimetic theory useful in promoting constructive performance practices, and discussions, among my students. With reference to pacific mimetic activity, I regard the introduction of *lectio divina* meditative reading of the Hebrew Bible or Buddhist sitting meditation as complementary positive exercises in mimetic ritual. Students learn by reading and discussing, indeed, but they also learn by doing—and, in Girardian terms, by *imitative* doing. Learning to do spiritually grounded mindful activity is possible by sensitivity to the religious vocabulary and coded movements of the group in which one is ritually located. By practicing a sort of ritual teamwork, students look to their group peers as models for how to do nuanced performance work in the learning environment. In my mind, this is the central relevance of Girard's theory of peace-making mimesis: understanding the power of group process to nurture participants' capacities for empathy and respect for the lived reality of other persons.

I recently introduced my religion and ecology class to a modified practice of *zazen* sitting meditation, and I asked a former student of mine named Richard to lead the class in the practice. Students paid close attention to Richard's lucid explanation of the notions of mindlessness and emptiness in Zen practice and to his modeling of this practice through his own posture and breathing. After Richard finished his brief introduction to the philosophy and practice of this type of meditation, I volunteered that I myself sometimes practiced contemplative exercises to stem cravings for consumer items in a relatively affluent culture. And I noted that I am not always successful in this regard. As an aside, I then joked that I admired the cool British-club soccer jersey that Richard was wearing in class that day and that I hoped my occasional forays into meditation practice might help me move away from such acquisitive leanings. At this point, Richard, upon hearing about my desire for his shirt, smiled, took the shirt off, and gave it to me (he was wearing another shirt under the jersey), saying, "Here, I would like you to have this." Although I quickly thanked Richard, I was stunned and nonplussed. Yet all of us, in an atmosphere of almost reverent quiet, proceeded to leave the classroom and walk to our outdoor meditation space to begin the group *zazen* exercise.

I look back on this exchange with Richard about the jersey as illustrative of Girard's thesis that positive human formation occurs in places where peaceful mimetic activity is taking place. Richard's spontaneous extravagance modeled to me and my students his unspoken position that he would not be drawn into a sense of personal right to ownership; his practice of non-acquisitive mimesis was an example to the class of generosity in a group setting and concomitant avoidance of any adversarial tension. In other circumstances as well, I have seen group ritual generate other transformative surprises, underscoring

Girard's thesis that we learn by observation and that acts of mimetic generosity, such as Richard's, create positive environments in which individuals' formation as whole persons is productively carried out and is sometimes imitated by others as well.

As Girard emphasizes, however, mimesis is often not a positive force. Therefore, when a ritual is embarked upon in a classroom setting, it is very important to guard the activity from becoming a factious or divisive affair in which a student or students feel marginalized by the larger group. Girard is particularly useful as a hedge against naïve optimism that the introduction of group activities, particularly ritual, will somehow produce positive personal and social results. He reiterates that scapegoating others who do not "fit" into a particular group setting is more often than not the product of ritual activity. His caveat against most such group activities is a cautionary note to instructors to be sensitive to the emotional and interpersonal energy in the classroom whenever they are leading or participating in ritual-based learning. I try to be aware of the mimetic dynamics of the class so that if any student, through trying to imitate his peers in the class assembly becomes physically or spiritually ill at ease with the activity in question, we can gently renegotiate his level of participation in the group setting without provoking the attention of others.

### Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to lay out the practical and theoretical prospects for ritual-based learning in the nonsectarian classroom in dialog with Girard's theory of mimesis and religion. In the course case study analyzed here, I am frank with my students that I have two objectives in teaching this course. On the one hand, the course is an exercise in critical thinking whereby I hope to familiarize students with a variety of worldviews toward nature and human beings' place in nature as can be gleaned through a comparative study of world religious texts and traditions. On the other hand, the course is animated by a moral concern to offer to students, through a study of the emerging discipline of religion and ecology, a potent resource for developing attitudes and behaviors that lead to sustainable lifestyles. Ritual plays a role in achieving both objectives, but it should be handled carefully—by attending to cultural sensitivities, the problem of theology in ritual, and the value of making ritual activity optional for some students. The class's exploration of ritual provides students with a limited experience of the potential of spiritual practice to ground the study of sacred texts experientially, and it may motivate students to cultivate mindful activities that lead to living in harmony with their neighbors and the wider systems that support life on our planet. Ritual is one of the means by which the ultimate goal of the course, transformational learning, is (I hope) achieved.

Finally, I have found Girard's theory of twofold mimesis to be an insightful theoretical voice in my attempt to understand better the nature and value of ritual practice. Mimesis, according to Girard, is a fact of life; the question it raises for ritual practice is whether we will practice enabling mimesis through nonrivalrous and nonaggressive imitation of others or become trapped in the whirlpool of conventional mimesis that leads to rivalry, envy, and ultimately personal and social disintegration. Healthy mimesis can be the source and product of classroom ritual, whereas acquisitive mimesis can lead to exclusionary and scapegoating behavior that warps the positive practice of classroom ritual. Many religious studies scholars are now willing to breach the wall that has long separated the study and practice of religion in modern institutions of higher learning. I suggest that this effort, if done with thought and foresight, can be effectively deployed so that students can learn about religion, in part, by existentially sampling aspects of the practices that have long carried meaning and value for devotees. To accomplish this end is to reinvent education in our time as intellectually robust "soul craft"—as critical inquiry through the study of texts and ritual practice that center on the needs of the whole person. Its critics notwithstanding, liberatory education for our time that is both head-intensive and heart-centered demands nothing less.

#### USEFUL MATERIALS

Readers may find René Gerard's *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* and *The Girard Reader* useful. Other works that may also prove especially helpful: Barnhill, David Landis, and Roger S. Gottlieb, eds. 2001. *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

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