

5.3 TYPES AND FUNCTIONS

There are a number of different ways to classify rituals. Typologies are not true or false, they are more or less useful. The typology I provide here derives from Anthony Wallace, an anthropologist, who argues that ritual behavior is the primary and most fundamental aspect of religion, and it can usefully be understood as purposeful or goal-directed behavior. (See "Suggestions for Further Reading.") Religious rituals aim to bring about or to prevent changes and therefore can be classified in terms of the kinds of changes or transformations they are thought to cause or prevent. As I describe Wallace's categories and give examples, see if you can extend the list of examples based on your own knowledge and experience.

1. Technological rituals seek to produce or prevent a change of state in nature so that humans benefit in some way. Examples include rain dances, fertility rites, hunting rituals, prayers for good weather, rituals for insuring a good harvest, and the like.
2. Therapeutic and antitherapeutic rituals seek to produce a change in the state of human health, either to heal the sick or bring sickness to the healthy. Examples include laying on of hands, anointing, witchcraft and so-called voodoo rites, prayers for health, and a vast variety of healing rituals using eggs, herbs, special ointments, dancing, singing, and sweating.
3. Ideological rituals seek social control by changing the mood, behavior, sentiments, motivations, and values of people, usually for the sake of the community as a whole. Examples include rites of passage, taboos that are ritually transmitted, teaching, preaching, studying sacred scriptures, and even "rituals of rebellion," such as carnival, Mardi Gras, and days of the dead (Halloween).
4. Salvation rituals seek to change a person's identity from a spiritually corrupt, polluted, sinful, or lost state to a spiritually saved state that provides freedom from sin, corruption, ignorance, and the like. Examples include baptism, communion, spirit possession, meditation, conversion, and altar calls.
5. Revitalization rituals seek to revitalize a culture or a religion seen as dying or in the process of being lost. They try to do for the community as a whole what salvation rituals do for the individual. These are not simple rituals, but what might be called ritual movements involving a number of complex actions. Examples include messianic movements like early Christianity, nativistic movements such as the Indian Ghost Dance, and early Mormon attempts to revitalize Christianity. New religious movements (what some people call "cults"), such as the Unification Church, also fall into this category. Political and religious movements such as the Moral Majority find their home here as well.