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Ritual Self-Discipline as a Response to the Human Condition: Toward a Semiotics of Ritual ‘Indices’

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Abstract:

Using examples from Vedic initiations and consecrations, this paper proposes to explain the general or first-order significance of certain widespread ascetical practices. The relevant practices relate to ubiquitous features of bodily existence: the needs and tendencies of the human body (food, sleep, sexual activity), and the phenomena of birth and death. Rule-governed restrictions on these, though well known as central features of asceticism in India and in many other cultures, are also fundamental to other forms of religious activity, including lay piety.

Indian texts addressing such practices offer a variety of explanations or justifications for such practices. Some of these appear ad hoc and dependent upon very specific textual or cultic references. Others however acknowledge the generic or universal concerns as rationales for such practices. For example, discussions of *vrata*, *dīkṣā*, and *upanayana* ceremonies in the late Vedic Brāhmaṇa texts explain the restricted diet and sleep of the consecrated as a means of making him like the gods.

I will further show that this model may be profitably applied to analogous ritual practices in other cultures, in spite of the fact that the understandings or interpretations of such practices—and indeed of the personal needs and tendencies underlying them—within their own traditions tend to be highly divergent. The apparent ubiquity of practices of this sort in religions around the world, and perhaps even in some contexts not normally called religious (e.g., in secular groups advocating self-discipline or austerity as moral virtue or means to self-empowerment) may be explained by noting that, at a basic level, they involve universal features of human experience that have been called ‘natural symbols’ (Mary Douglas) or ‘indexical signs’ (in the terms of C. S. Peirce’s semiotics). Peirce distinguished three types of sign: a ‘symbol’ is associated with its object by convention or law; the icon actually ‘exhibits’ its object (as a map or picture); the index is associated with or affected by its object as a matter of fact. I argue that some indices (and icons) can be legible independently of any merely conventional association. This can explain the appearance in widely disparate cultures of virtually identical ritual signs and even complex ritual gestures built upon them.

In this sense, the compulsion to eat, sleep, and sex ‘point to’ the body’s limitations and mortality, and associate these with pleasure. Fasting, vigil, and sexual continence are formal assertions of the will to deny Death’s empire over us. The Vedic texts thus speak of the condition of one thus consecrated as quasi divine (at least temporarily or within the sphere of ritual action). The consecrated is likewise purified of dirt and decay, and represented as undergoing a rebirth from a higher, sacred womb. By virtue of deploying indexical signs pointing to renewal and effacement of decay, the ritual acts of this type become a gestural assertion of control over what is otherwise beyond normal human power, of resistance to helplessness before the laws of nature.