

Devotional: Anthropological Ritual Analysis

Rituals give us the unique opportunity to grow closer to a culture through action. For participants, rituals provide a medium to put their beliefs into practice. For observers, rituals provide a means to learn about a culture through activity – one of the most expressive forms of communication available. Throughout this paper, we explore a Christian ritual called devotional as a means to learn more about the participants, and their beliefs not only about their ritual, but also their religion, each other, and the rest of the world.

Devotional is a weekly gathering that involves college students meeting in a classroom on Friday nights to worship together. As the name implies, a primary group focus at this event is demonstrating devotion to God and their Christian religion. The schedule is similar to that of a Christian Sunday service: the event opens up with songs in which everyone is expected to stand and sing. The singing is followed by announcements on logistics and administrative topics. This may involve things like upcoming events, statistics about new members, and other such items. After this, more signing ensues to reinvigorate the crowd. Fourth is the main part of the night: the lesson. The lesson gets preached by senior member of the congregation, who usually speaks about a faith-based topic that is especially relevant to college-aged Christians. The speaker is usually the only non-collegiate attendee, and is regarded as an authority figure of the group. He or she might also invite guest speakers to supplement the lesson, which are held in similar regard. Unlike many conventional classroom lessons, the audience plays almost as big a role as the speaker, with encouragement and reactions playing a large role during the speech. The lesson concludes with a final dismissal, but most participants stay long after dismissal just to stay and converse with other members. All-in-all, the event lasts about two hours and is marked with energy and attentiveness.

Though very structured and specific, this ritual is not very popular across Christianity. Along with low relative social-proof, the target demographic of college students has an attention span that is notoriously difficult to maintain. These factors beg the question: What keeps participants coming back? Upon interviewing some attendees, one important principle that emerged was the idea of sacredness versus profanity. This is a dichotomy Durkheim discusses in his *Origins of Totemic Beliefs*. He introduces this idea when explaining how totemic rituals of the Australian culture in question create a distinct mental state of the tribe members which precipitates beyond the setting of the ritual and into everyday life. In similar fashion, a foundational premise of devotional is that it creates a sacred setting for members to practice worship. All the members are uniting for a common purpose, and have common beliefs about how to practice Christianity. Furthermore, the atmosphere of the crowd creates an implicit expectation on attendees to amplify what they see as their “spiritual” selves. In this way, members of the group view worshiping events within their community, even beyond devotional, to be sacred. In contrast, much of the world outside of their rituals are viewed as profane. This is especially true of Friday nights. Environments of partying, drunkenness, and indulgence are pervasive among college students on such nights. For most members of the cohort, they feel that time engaged in profanity brings them farther from God. Thus, the more time spent in sacred activities, the better. In this way, devotional becomes a sort of refuge that provides members with a reliable escape from perceived profanity and distractions of Friday night, and allows them to engage in sacred worship together with likeminded community. This interpretation suggests another underlying purpose of promoting social cohesion. Because their views on Christianity are so specific, devotional provides a unique opportunity to be around Christians of similar convictions and similar life stage. As alluded to earlier, there is a sort of “crowd organism” that

forms during the meetings and amplifies a collective effervescence among the members. Every part of the night is a unified, shared experience – singing together, learning together, engaging together until final dismissal. Even after dismissal, members continue connecting on a more intimate, personal level through individual conversations. Through regular attendance, members are able to form very close and personal relationships with not only each other, but with the community as a whole. Interestingly, this social cohesion comes with a divisive byproduct. The full community ranges from children to seniors, however the amplified cohesion within the college cohort contributes to a social rift between the college students and other members of the collective. Even with this condition, the integrating aspect of the ritual dominates, and members participate as a way to further connect with the group and engage in sacred activities over profane ones.

In the previous section, we explored what the participation implies about the nature of the event. Let us now explore the reverse: What does the event imply about the nature of the participants? One of the strongest traits revealed is sense of mutual dependence on the body for members to practice faith. As previously mentioned, there are several different activities comprising devotional – from song to speech to casual conversation. Most people aren't outperformers in all of those areas, but some participants have respective skill in at least one of those categories. Since all members engage in all parts of the nights, they get a chance to share their skills and also experience the skills of others. Interviewed participants feel that this shared experience enhances their worship far beyond what they would be able to do individually. Furthermore, they view God as a relational being, and as a result they feel that building positive relationships is a big part of growing closer to God. Several introverted attendees have remarked that, by going to devotional regularly, they have had to train themselves to be more extroverted

just so they can get better at getting closer to people and working on the communal aspect of the practice. In addition to their communal priority, devotional reveals how the members prioritize spoken word as a means of growing in their faith. The main focus of the night is the lesson, which involves an experienced speaker relating a spiritual message through emotion, imagery, and other devices that deeply touch the crowd. As mentioned, the audience reacts with heightened responses. It is commonplace for an especially touching line to be followed by “tell us!”, “amen!”, and other such encouragement from the crowd. The speaker, in turn, feeds off this energy to continue their delivery. This energy dynamic amplifies the power of the lesson and glorifies the spoken word as a means of worship. A final takeaway is how the group members view God overall. In the Durkheim paper, it reads “the power to which the cult is addressed does not loom far above, crushing him with its superiority; instead it is very near and bestows upon him useful abilities that he is not born with” (225). In the same way, participants of devotional view God almost as a friend and a close form of support rather than some distant, incomprehensible entity. This is reflected not only in the way they seek God through the lessons but also through each other, trying to learn from each other and maintaining the possibility that opportunities to grow closer to God can really come from anywhere.

A stark juxtaposition of college liveliness and religious discipline, broad communal focus and intimate personal connection, straightforward classroom structure and abstract faith – devotional is a rare and informative window into this Christian cohort. From their focus on avoiding profanity and emphasizing sacred relationships, they created a ritual imparting these priorities on one of the most pivotal demographics within their community. From this ritual, we not only learn more about the beliefs of this group, but also the broader relationship between society and transcendent ideals as a whole.

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