

Ritualized Scripture: Philosophy and Ritual

Throughout history, man has had two basic options when it comes to a world view. For the common man, there has been pagan religion, while for the elite there has been philosophy.

The pagan religions existed many millennia before philosophy as we know it, and are characterized by performing rituals. The passage of time gave rise to a mythology for these gods. Most of what people know of pagan religions is really the mythology that accompanied them; few know of or care about the rituals themselves. Perhaps human sacrifice is the only ritual from that time commonly known today, although our culture seems so desensitized to it that normally elicits no reaction.

Philosophy is the product of civilization, and in ancient times it was almost exclusively the purview of those who not only had a highly developed sense of contemplation, but also the means to spend time doing just this (in other words, either rich enough for such a distraction, or had a patron who relied on their wisdom). As a result, philosophy was generally a pastime of the elite. A commoner did not have great enough responsibilities to need specialized enlightenment, while the influential could not remain in power without some concern beyond the immediate future.

It is true that some philosophies did trickle down into the vulgar mythologies. But even here, it was still in the realm of the elite. When the gods mixed with mortals, they rarely dealt with commoners. The morals presented in mythologies are almost exclusively for the royalty, nobles or great warriors. What virtues and morals may lie in these stories were either to assist the elite, or to simply reinforce common sense. The story of Perseus, for example, may certainly *entertain* the vulgar, but what benefit does this story have in regards to growing crops or maintaining the humble hut the peasant uses for a home? Perhaps cunning and dedication to one's purpose can be applied to all, but Perseus's bravery, leadership, ally building and other acts are virtues and ethics the aristocracy needed to have. And let us not forget the fantastic artifacts and creatures that inevitably populate these myths. Of what use is a magical weapon for a peasant, what is he to do with a fantastic beast?

While philosophy is varied, for this work I want to focus on morality. A great many philosophies have developed moral codes that are amazingly similar to Christian morals. Indeed, rumors of oriental teachings came to Europe by the spice trade, and Christians were eager for a sea route to open so they could study them in detail. Such codes, to one extent or another, have existed worldwide. Some call this "universal morality," but in keeping with C.S. Lewis, I will call this "the Tao" (the way). The amazing thing is that, for civilizations that followed the Tao, inevitably prospered. When aspects of the Tao were ignored, the civilization began to decline. For more on the Tao, I recommend C.S. Lewis' book *The Abolition of Man*.

For most of human history, the Tao remained for the elites. Wise rulers invoked the Tao in their laws, and pagan priests wove simplistic virtues into the culture's mythology as mentioned above. The commoners merely had to obey; they need not (and probably did not) contemplate what higher meanings the Tao might offer. The Tao, as a philosophy, has only been fully integrated into two religions: Hinduism and Christianity. One could argue that the Tao was also integrated into Judaism, but in their own history they admit that they could not maintain the two, and kept reverting back to paganism.

While the Tao and religion are both found in Hinduism, they are not really integrated. The

vulgar need not worry about the Tao, and the elite need not participate in the rituals. A hermit can sit in his hut and contemplate the mysteries of the universe while nearby a village is having a big ritual. The hermit need not go to the ritual, and the villagers need not ask about his conclusions.

It is only in Christianity where the ritual and the Tao come together. We see throughout the Gospels Jesus and his followers diligently performing all the Jewish rituals required by law.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:17-19.

While the pharisees often tried to accuse Him of breaking the law (usually because Jesus performed a miracle on the Sabbath), the Tao made flesh was found innocent by a third party. But it was at the Last Supper when the mystery of salvation was at last revealed (the greatest philosophical insight ever), when the Tao was specifically and deliberately tied to a ritual -- "Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.'" (Luke 22:19-20) One only need read 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 to see how seriously the early Christians took this marriage of philosophy and ritual.

It is this aspect that makes Christianity a universal religion. This is what brings the commoners and the elites together. A know-it-all such as myself must recite prayers, participate in the sacrifice and sing hymns along with everyone else. The newest convert in the Amazon jungle must now think at higher levels: he must love the unloveable, forgive bitter enemies, admit to his own faults and try to improve himself.

Not only is the union of ritual and philosophy one of the many unique characteristics of Christianity, it is essential to the faith. Without the ritual, Christianity would just be another Tao. Without philosophy, it would just be another pagan religion.

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