Formal Religion: Routine or Ritual?

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Throughout our lives we participate in religion along with many other activities and events that shape the way we think, live, interact, and perceive others. Does routine or ritual prevail more strongly in our spiritual life? Engaging in a routine requires little energy or conscious thought and can become no more than an observable repetitive action allowing us to achieve what needs to be done. Due to a sense of togetherness with community and maintenance of strong family relationships, rituals offer individuals an opportunity to create special, memorable moments with intense emotional and symbolic meaning. In the earliest stages of our childhood we are told to participate in these activities and we obey these orders. Our experiences fluctuate between rituals and routines with regards to our attitude, emotional state, and the maturity of our beliefs. As we move into adolescence, we begin to form a conceptual framework that contains meaning and values participating in rituals. Once we become adults, we more fully understand and appreciate the reasons for our actions. As adults, we are responsible for conveying this message to the younger members of our families and communities. We will discuss the different ways we see communication theory in religion, and more specifically how the combination of routines and rituals are reflected in this religious setting.

As children we learn many routines from parents and others in authority, such as brushing our teeth every morning, making our bed, behaving in school, doing our homework, and showering before going to bed. Religion is arguable the most important subject that we were taught as children. Going to church as a child was a routine just like the other childhood chores we did and activities we learned. We knew every Sunday that we had to go to church our family. Many times we ate lunch together afterward, and this was possibly our favorite part. This
reoccurrence every Sunday assured us that this routine was important. This was one of the few things in life that was guaranteed to happen. If I stayed up too late on a Saturday night I would get the sound of, “Kirt, get up! Get dressed. It is Sunday and you know that we are going to church and do not want to be late!” at 6:30 in the morning. Examples such as the one above have happened to both of us during our childhood. All of our friends knew that on Sunday we would be at church so we could not sleep at anyone’s house on Saturday nights. This known fact to all of our friends made this another characteristic of a routine. People knew our families were Catholic and would attend church every Sunday. At this stage in our life we went to church because of our parent’s authority.

These characteristics act as evidence to support our argument that religion can resemble a routine at times. We remember wondering why the priest held up something that looked like a big round cookie. Why did we have to kneel? Why did everyone stand in line and walk to the front of the church to visit the priest? “I’m hungry too, why can’t I have a cookie?” We did not learn the emotional and symbolic significance of the Holy Communion until we were older. There was also a lack of attention during church at this stage in our lives. We agreed that we were more concerned with who we saw at church or when we would leave than what was in these pretty books in the pews or what the priest had to say. We always enjoyed the events of Sunday because we knew there would be a good lunch after church, but we lacked the understanding and reasoning to fully appreciate the ritual that was going on around us. The lack of commitment along with the lack of emotional investment left us with little reflection of the ritual we had just participated in. We had few feelings or thoughts after church other than the joy of leaving. Because the internal feelings and emotions of attending church were not felt at this age level the uniqueness of being there is what made this activity a routine.
During the next stage of our lives we experienced special moments at church that made us want to understand more of why we are supposed to attend. Our parents and mentors invited us to participate in these sacred religious rituals. We were being taught the significance of baptism, confession, confirmation, and receiving the Eucharist. In the Catholic religion we became connected to our higher being and wanted to enrich our relationship with God. This new understanding brought on strong internal feelings that made us want to attend church more often. We felt a sense of togetherness like never before. We felt a connection with God and now sensed his presence in our life. Now there was no one forcing us to get up out of bed or specifying our dress codes for church. We were self-motivated to attend the services. This self-motivation demonstrates the evolution of our spirituality from a routine to a ritual. Individuals that may see us attend church every Sunday with our families may perceive this as a routine, but our internal feelings and emotions left us feeling much different. The combination of this new meaning and understanding made attending church a ritual for us.

Weddings, Ash Wednesday, Christmas, Easter, baptisms, and funerals are very important holidays and events in our lives. These events carry with them a sense of affection. These rituals use symbolism to evoke our deep emotions. The togetherness of the community and stability within the family transformed what we used to see as routines to important rituals. This is how we, as Catholics, are supposed to behave and feel. Our faith should be more than an identity or a mere flag. We should actively follow Christ during the practice of our faith. Ashes on our forehead served as a symbol to the world proclaiming that we are Catholics practicing our faith. We also pass this belief and set of rules down to other generations. As these rituals gain greater worth in our lives, our families and communities ask for us to serve as mentors to younger people on their spiritual journey. Parents who were born into the Catholic Church want
their kids to be married in the Catholic Church. The ritual of going to church allowed our family to become a member of a community with values that were parallel with our families’ values. This community and the rituals we participated in together gave stability to our families. Our families remained strong because we attended church together. Every Sunday, our families went to Mass, ate together, relaxed and recharged for the upcoming week, and enjoyed each other’s company. These activities centered on a Catholic ritual and offered us a sense of stability and satisfaction.

Formal religion has emerged in our lives from a young age. At times we wished we could have escaped its grip. Our parents made sure to disappoint us. At other times we felt the pull of religion on our spirits and felt close to God. We fully participated in celebrating the Eucharist for the first time at our First Communions. We enjoyed the feelings of purity we gained during the sacrament of Reconciliation. We invited new members of our families into the community at Baptisms. We celebrated with our families and friends at Weddings. This ritual gave us the opportunity to enjoy ourselves, meet extended family, and make new friends. During Confirmation, we had the chance to witness our faith and proclaim our beliefs as young adults to our families and communities. When my grandmother was terminally ill in the hospital, our family was depressed, confused, and needed strength. A priest came to her room, prayed with us, read from the bible, and anointed my grandmother. This helped her prepare for the afterlife and also helped the rest of the family to come together, look to God for help during this time. Funerals allowed our families and friends from the community to come together to mourn and celebrate the wonderful lives of our lost loved ones. We all prayed together and listened to a eulogy praising and honoring our loved one.
Engaging in routine is a repetitive, almost thoughtless activity. We experienced a religion dominated by routines as young members of our community. Engaging in ritual requires more emotional and spiritual work. This becomes possible with maturity. We believe more strongly, have a deeper reverence, and feel a real connection with God. We open ourselves up to the Lord and our communities through rituals. With our spiritual and emotional work come great rewards. We feel blessed. This work can demand a great deal of energy and even drain us. When we fall short on energy, our religious practice may also fall from ritual to routine, but we try to guard against this fall. We see our sense of religion shifting between routine and ritual in our lives. This shift results from changes in our maturity, emotions, attitudes, and energy. We also understand that the greatest rewards and satisfaction come when we participate in religious rituals that bring us closer to our families, communities, and God.