
Ritual Process and Christian Discipling: Contextualizing a Buddhist Rite of Passage

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The study of ritual process has shown that the liminal phase of a typical rite of passage suspends social structures and provides an anti-structure or sense of community in which formation is facilitated or effected. One such rite accompanying the passage from childhood to adulthood effects this "bonding to meaning" in a particularly striking way. As such it represents a ritual structure particularly useful for the discipling of new or immature believers, particularly, though not exclusively, those from traditional religious backgrounds. The Buddhist Shin Byu ceremony in which Burmese children are formed into adult Buddhists by following the Buddha's own transition from wealth to enlightenment provides a test case for critical contextualization. Can a similarly structured rite of passage for Christian discipling be modeled after some inaugural events in the life of Jesus?

On any day I can go out into the city and make as many converts as time permits; but while I take new converts into the church others are leaving it," lamented one of my African students. "Our problem is not evangelism," he insisted, "but discipling."¹

By discipling he meant the process of enabling the nurture and formation of Christian believers into Christ's mature followers, or, into conformity with his image (Romans 8:29). Discipling applies structures and procedures to the task of Christian formation.

The great commission requires the use of both liturgical and didactic means for discipling the nations: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20a).²

As is well known, the controlling verb in the passage is "make disciples,"

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the participles “baptizing” and “teaching” indicating the means by which disciples are to be made (Barth 1961). While discipling clearly involves the primarily cognitive dimension of instruction (Bauer 1988:109-128), it also involves the ritual process of baptism.³

In this article I argue that one such ritual process, the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood effects a bonding to meaning. As such it represents a ritual structure particularly useful for the discipling of new or immature believers, particularly, though not exclusively, those from traditional religious backgrounds.⁴ In the process, I explore the meaning and function of a specific rite of passage, the Buddhist Shin Byu ceremony, suggesting how a community of faith might construct a parallel rite from inaugural experiences in the life of Jesus.

The Phenomenology of a Rite of Passage

A rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960) enables initiates to make a transition from one clearly defined position in society to another.

These rites usually accompany the change from non-being to being in birth (1960:41-64), from childhood to adulthood in puberty rites (1960:65-101), from the single to the married estate in marriage (1960:116-145), and from life to death in the funeral (1960:146-165).⁵ All cultures have such rites.⁶

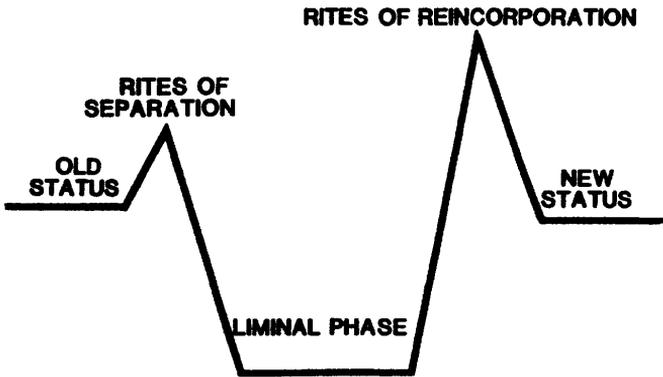


Figure 1. Rite of Passage Structure

The rite of passage includes three phases (Kimball 1960:vii; Van Gennep 1960:11; Kaelber 1987:230) (see figure 1). The first phase involves the orchestration of symbols in a ritual of separation from others in the old state from which a transition is being made. For example, in the male initiatory rite among Australian aborigines, the boys are separated from their mothers, seized by unknown, often masked men, and told that they are to die (Van Gennep 1960:74; Eliade 1958:4-10). The second phase provides initiates with a kind of limbo state of transition where they are “betwixt and between” (V. Turner 1967:93-111; 1977:95; 1987:4-19) clearly defined statuses and roles in

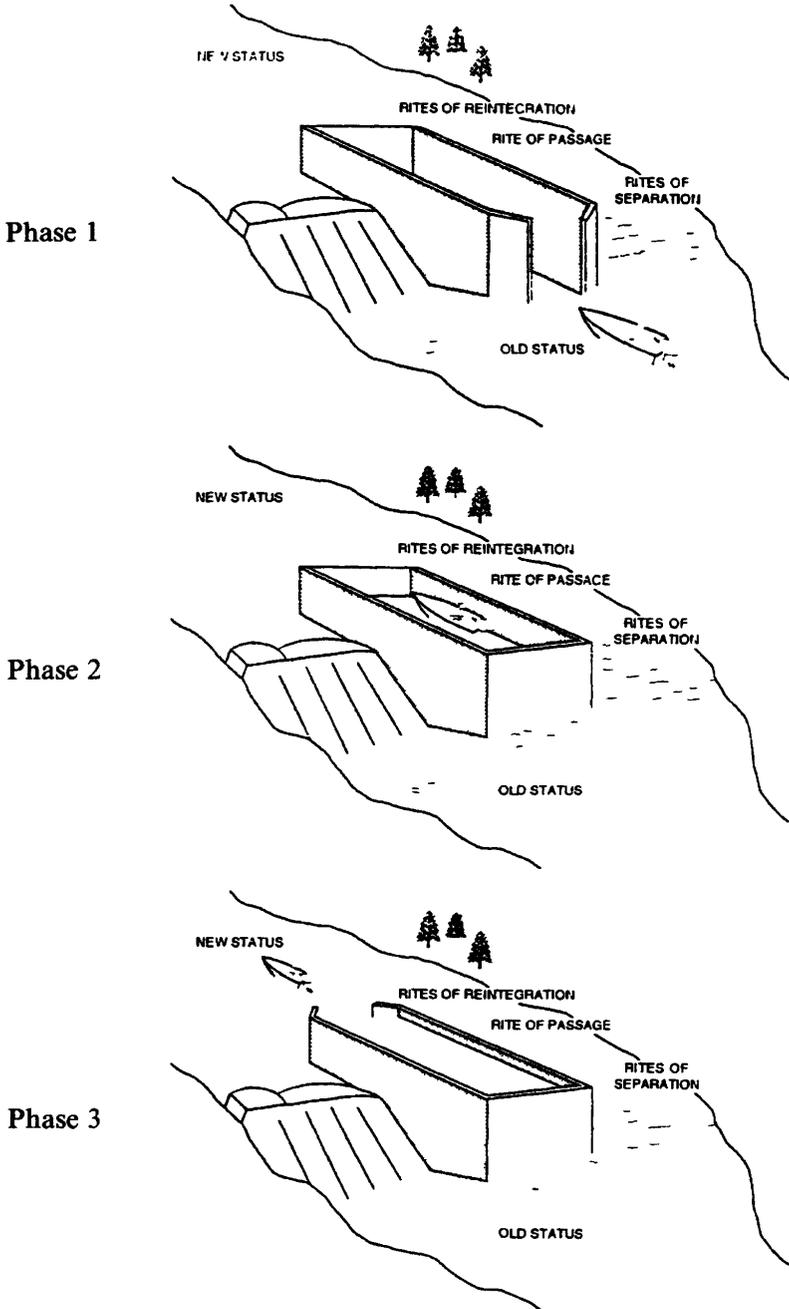


Figure 2. The lock system as a model of changing social status.

the society. This phase, discussed below, involves processes of ordeal resulting in physical and mental weakening as though the initiates were to forget their childhood. Through ascetic disciplines, such as fasting, silence, and subjection to darkness, novices are introduced to spiritual practice and prepared for instruction in spiritual meaning (Van Gennep 1960:74-75; Eliade 1958:16). The last phase involves a ritual reincorporation of the initiates into the society as full-fledged persons of the new status or state to which the transition is being made. The final act of incorporation among Australian aborigines marking passage from childhood to adulthood is a ceremony honoring the deity and removing a tooth of the initiate, identifying him permanently as a man (Van Gennep 1960:74-75).

One way to conceptualize the role of the three phases of the rite-of-passage process is to think of it as a lock complex in a river transportation system (see figure 2). The lock system uses dams and locks with upper and lower gates to raise river craft from a lower level on the river to a higher one. In the same way, a rite of passage enables the status elevation of initiates from childhood, for example, to adulthood. Just as the elevation of ships in order to avoid an unnavigable portion of the river would be impossible without leaving the river's ongoing flow, so the elevation of social status for the initiates would be impossible without suspending the force of social structure. Thus, rituals of separation remove initiates from the flow of social structure, shutting them into the liminal phase of the process in which they are raised to the level of the new social reality into which they are to be integrated. Rituals of reintegration resemble the lock complex's barrage, gates, and canals, now operating to return the initiates to the flow of social reality at a new level. Without the lock complex, the raising of the boats would be as impossible as the transition would be without the rituals of separation and reintegration; yet, just as the space within the lock itself enables the raising of the river craft, so it is in the middle phase of liminality that the status of the child is raised to that of an adult.

To understand the significance of this ritual process, one must realize that the social structures that normally prevail in a society do so because people in the society take them to be as real as the flow of the river. Social structures represent maps of reality. In other words, *real* children must be transformed into *real* adults. This requires suspending social structures in order to transform children into adults who are real for themselves, their parents, and their society—no mean task!

The weight of the task can be assessed by examining the circumstances prevailing in North America where no standard rite of passage from childhood to adulthood exists. In North America a protracted and amorphous state of adolescence prevails in which biological and psychological transitions are taking place at varying rates in different individuals, unassisted by ritual processes that would make the transition clear and definite for all involved. It is no wonder, then, that so much effort and agony go into helping people through this period. It is as though North Americans have to pull their young up the steepest and rockiest part of the river's course.⁷

At one point (at least) our lock complex turns out to be too simple. While

the lock system merely changes the level on which the boat navigates the river, the passage complex must transform its children into adults. This transformation occurs largely in the liminal phase of the rite. It is to this liminal phase that we must now turn.

Liminality and Bonding to Meaning

The liminal phase is a *chaotic* time precisely because it abolishes all socially sanctioned identities, statuses, and roles. With reality suspended, clear guidelines for action and clues of identity vanish. Initiates die to the old order and are not yet resurrected to the new. Their guides and instructors, seasoned and skilled in the ways of their people, enhance the chaotic quality of this liminal state by submitting initiates to ordeals surrounded by symbols of womb and tomb (Eliade 1958:35-37). In other words, initiates return to the chaotic state of non-being in order to be reborn into a new and unknown reality. Victor Turner calls this chaotic non-structured character of liminality “anti-structure” (V. Turner and E. Turner 1978:250; V. Turner 1977:vii).

But because this anti-structure suspends all former guidelines for behavior and identity, rendering initiates “structurally invisible” (V. Turner 1967:98; 1987:8), certain very positive characteristics also prevail. One of these is *creativity*—new things are possible because little is taken for granted and because “unprecedented combinations of familiar elements” can take place (V. Turner 1982a:27). Another is a sense of community.⁸ Victor Turner’s work suggests that there is something humanly compelling about the sense of common humanity that emerges from the sense of community prevailing in the liminal phase of a ritual process. For a brief period, participants interact not according to the binding roles of their social status, behind the veil of which the human person is only dimly discernible, but according to the concrete idiosyncratic individual identity implied in their common humanity (V. Turner 1977:177).⁹

Like newborn infants, initiates in the liminal phase of a rite of passage are ripe for bonding. E. Thomas and Elizabeth S. Brewster (1981) have already noticed the striking similarities between the traumatic event of birth and “culture shock,” the trauma of entering a new culture. They focus upon the radical newness involved in both events: the senses of both the infant and the missionary “are bombarded by a multitude of new sensations, sights, sounds, and smells” (453) to which both can respond effectively because they are in “a state of unique readiness” to belong to their new context (454). Research cited by the Brewsters documents the importance of infants’ bonding to their parents. Normally the state of unique readiness immediately following birth results in newborns bonding to their parents. However, in a hospital environment in which the newborn is made groggy by the effects of the pain medicine administered to the mother and is snatched away from his or her mother at birth to be placed in a nursery, the infant bonds to the wrong people or objects. The Brewsters argue that new missionaries also bond with the wrong people when during their period of culture shock and consequent ripeness for bonding, they spend their time with missionaries. They should spend the initial period of their entry into a new culture with

the indigenous people of that culture so that the ripeness for bonding entailed in the experience of culture shock will result in a bonding to the new culture and the people of the new culture rather than to the missionary community (464).

The obvious similarities between the liminalities of birth, culture shock, and the transition phase of a rite of passage suggest that bonding is an apt image to describe the process of forming a new identity and a sense of belonging that result from that process. But in addition to the bonding to a new identity and the bonding to the community in a new way that result from a rite of passage, initiates bond to the beliefs and values of that community as well. I call this pedagogical function of the rite-of-passage process "bonding to meaning."

Among the major implications of Arnold van Gennep's (1960) pioneering analysis of rites of passage, according to Kimball (1960:x), are its implications for learning theory, implications which at the time of Kimball's writing had yet to be explored.

Recently, Thomas Peterson (1987:73-84) has explained some of these implications, arguing that, in addition to the usual focus in the study of rites of passage and other ritual events on the change in status that is wrought by them, attention needs to be focused upon the way in which initiation unifies the initiates' experiences within a religious frame of meaning. Peterson shows that the liminality in the ritual vision quest of Lame Deer, a Lakota Native American, provided "occasion for Lame Deer to begin personally appropriating the tribe's most important symbol [the sacred pipe] for his own use" (76). "Lame Deer's experience in the vision pit," according to Peterson, marked "the beginning of a personal odyssey to understand the deep mysteries of life—his relationship with the spirits, with nature, and with his tribe" (76). In other words, his vision quest represented for Lame Deer a rite of passage in which he bonded to the meaning of his people's religious tradition.

Even more recently, and more closely related to discipling, Kenneth Tollefson (1990:315-328), has brought together evidence from anthropology, Judeo-Christian history, and the experience of Christ to show that the rite-of-passage structure presents a "*pedagogical opportunity* for promoting personal development and spiritual growth" (315).¹⁰ Tollefson lays out the process of this pedagogical opportunity which takes place primarily under the liminal conditions of the phase of transition (316-319). The *marginality* of the initiates left in the wake of the stripping away of their old and familiar cultural clues to, and patterns of, identity, status, and role is intensified by a delay in any provision for new cultural patterns. This marginal experience encourages *reflection*. Initiates reflect upon the familiar patterns of the past, now gone forever, as well as upon the seemingly unattainable patterns and requirements of the future. The process of reflection in turn serves to heighten *cognitive dissonance*. At last, the growing need to reduce this unbearable dissonance forces upon initiates a general *reorientation* in self-understanding and in perception of appropriate social obligation and behavior (317). It is the result of this "intensely creative and personal process" (Tollefson 1990:317) that I am terming bonding to meaning.

A rite of passage serves also to renew the bonding of the whole community to its religious tradition, becoming for it also what Peterson (1987:81) calls "a threshold of transcendence." Peterson ends his analysis of rites of passage as bonding to meaning for the whole community¹¹ with a discussion of infant baptism which he says aids the Christian community in dealing with the question:¹² "What does it mean to be a Christian in a world of sin?" (1987:82).

Thus, initiatory experiences introduce initiates into the cultural values, worldview, and vital customs of their faith traditions and communities. Eliade holds (1958:xv) that people of "archaic societies" in their initiation rites assumed a "responsibility for receiving and transmitting spiritual values" with "almost awesome seriousness." Transmitting spiritual values, or enabling bonding to meaning, is discipling.¹³

Need it be argued further, then, that ritual process in general and rites of passage in particular can provide means for effecting or facilitating Christian formation? If so, I point to Thomas M. Finn's (1989:69-85) contention that "Christians survived in Rome [in the late second century] to a large extent because they developed a dynamic ritual process for the making of Christians. . ." (69).¹⁴

We turn now to an exposition of a rite of passage for boys in Burma in which initiates identify with the spiritual journey of the Buddha in the process of becoming adults. Here a Buddhist community transmits its spiritual values to its young who are bonded to its most cherished meanings. I shall then offer an outline of a parallel rite of passage for Christians based on some inaugural events in the life of Christ.

The Ship Byu Rite: Buddhist Formation Through Identification with the Buddha¹⁵

The Shin Byu rite in Burmese Buddhism, by which "a child of a Buddhist becomes a Buddhist" (Smith 1965:41), reenacts the Great Going Forth in the life of the Buddha. That is, the male initiate makes essentially the same journey that Prince Gautama, the Buddha, made when he renounced the wealth and privilege of his status as prince and said goodbye to his wife and son to take up the wandering, ascetic life of a holy person. Although some village boys remain in the liminal state of monkhood for life, most make the passage back into the life of a village layperson.¹⁶

Parents and other sponsors of the initiates gain merit as they spend vast amounts of money on these ceremonies which provide a festive day for the whole community and its invited guests. In the village studied by Spiro in the 1960s, families sent out printed invitations to relatives and friends in seven or eight villages. The invitations focus not on the passage of the children themselves, but on the merit to be gained by their parents and sponsors. The guests, most of whom come for the entertainment, feasting, and festive activities of the ceremony's first two days, bring gifts to help defray the great cost of the rite. They, in fact, leave before the ritual passage of the children has been completed (Spiro 1970:244).

On the first day, an imitation of the palace of Gautama is constructed

and an orchestra performs. The second day begins with the feeding of monks inside the palace and other guests outside it. On the occasion observed by Spiro (1970:238), two hundred people were served. The male initiates are dressed in royal attire. The female initiates, who will be initiated in a simpler ceremony in which their ears will be pierced and which has nothing to do with classical Buddhism, are also present, dressed regally. After entertainment and a procession of the whole party to three village monasteries and back, a professional master of ceremonies conducts the main public part of the rite, including, among many of the features, a song celebrating the victory of the Buddha over eight challenges; a short discourse on the retribution of karma; and a ceremony in which initiates, boys and girls, do obeisance to parents, teachers, and grandparents. The master of ceremonies who has performed all these rituals invests the initiates with a cotton thread which he has spun during the ceremony; he sprinkles each initiate with water and puts a leaf from the Burmese victory flower in the hair of each, while the Victory Song is sung again; finally, he pierces one ear of each of the girls, ending the main ceremony attended by most of the people.

Next follows the core initiation for the boys which only the parents and sponsors attend. The initiates have their heads shaved and don the saffron robes of the monastic order. Even though shaving hurts some, the boys must not cry out. Their hair, now sacred because of their status as monks, must not fall to the ground. Hair removed, the robed novices recite the Ten Precepts and the Confession of Faith, making them novices in the Order (*sangha*). They now return to the palace for the final ceremony of the second day, performed only by monks and attended only by monks, parents, sponsors, close relatives, the village headman, and a few village elders. This ceremony features a short sermon by the senior monk on the benefits of the Shin Byu rite in which he asks parents and sponsors to make a wish. After stating that their wish is the attainment of nirvana, the sponsors and parents pour water as a libation, saying, "May we, as a result of this *shin-byu* ceremony, attain nirvana" (Spiro 1970:245).

On the third and final day, novices are given new names which they will use as long as they remain in the monastery, and whenever they return to it, a water libation is made, and the senior monk preaches on the comparison of the parent or other sponsor with the Buddha. A final meal, provided by parents or sponsors, concludes the Shin Byu rite.

Spiro (1970:234-235) makes clear that, instrumentally, this "most important of all Burmese Buddhist ceremonies" is the means par excellence by which the parents and sponsors acquire merit.¹⁷ Nevertheless, symbolically, according to him, the rite also "denotes the passage of the boy from the status of bisocial being to that of spiritual person. No Burmese male is truly human—not to mention Buddhist—unless he has worn the yellow robe."

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1965:41-49) bypasses the merit-gaining function of the Shin Byu rite, focusing upon its symbolic impact as a rite-of-passage upon parents, the village community, and the initiates themselves. Throughout the ceremony, the release of the child to adulthood becomes less traumatic for the parents. For them the child is released to the same process

which the Buddha underwent (1965:42). The completeness of the release of the child for adulthood registers for both the novice and his parents when he, on the regular round of begging with the other monks, stands at the door of his own home. Neither he nor his parents may make any sign of recognition of familial relationship (Spiro 1970:246).

The initiates, themselves, participate dramatically in the story and symbolic world of the Buddha—something which has fascinated them since early childhood (Smith 1965:43). For everybody in the community, the rite represents a dramatic reinforcement of religious values and commitments (Smith 1965:43). In other words, through the ritual creation of liminal openness and the orchestration of symbols connected with the story of Buddha and the cosmology and way of life of the Buddhist community, a transmission of spiritual values and a communal bonding to meaning has been effected.

Using the Rite of Passage Structure for Discipling in a Cross-Cultural Setting

In my effort to demonstrate the potential of ritual process on the rite-of-passage model for Christian formation, I have shown the phenomenology of the rite-of-passage structure, stressing especially the rich pedagogical properties of liminality, and offered an example from Burmese village Buddhism. I now take up the task of using the rite-of-passage structure in the formation of Christians, narrowing my focus by limiting the application to the construction of a Christian rite of passage parallel to the Shin Byu ceremony.¹⁸

Critical Contextualization

Paul Hiebert's (1987) critical contextualization process provides us with guidelines for adapting non-Christian practices for Christian use. He suggests that the Christian believers from a given culture, under the guidance of leaders with cross-cultural training and experience, first study their culture inductively and uncritically, gathering and analyzing traditional beliefs and customs in relation to whatever issue or question they are addressing. The purpose of this first stage is to understand their culture in as unbiased a way as possible. Next, under the guidance of their leader(s) they look to Scripture, studying those passages carefully which are relevant to the issue under discussion. Then leader(s) and people examine the cultural form at issue critically to determine how it should be dealt with. Hiebert suggests several possible outcomes of this critical process: (1) proving not to be unbiblical, the form could be used by the church as it is; (2) proving unscriptural, it could be rejected; (3) it could be modified to yield explicit Christian meaning; (4) a functional substitute from another culture could replace it; (5) a rite from the community's wider heritage of Christian historical experience with a similar function could be substituted for it; or (6) the community could create a new functional equivalent for it (1987:110). Finally the community, aided by their leader(s), employs the form under scrutiny, assured that it will convey its Christian meaning effectively to people of their culture (1987:109-111).

As a *rite of passage*, the Shin Byu ceremony would certainly not be discarded since, as we have stressed, rites of passage occur in all cultures. Yet, as a rite of passage constructed on the model of the experience of the Buddha, it would surely not be appropriate for Christian discipling. But as a rite of passage constructed on the model of the experience of a founder of a religious tradition, it suggests at least one possibility for modification. That is, a rite-of-passage ceremony could be constructed by a people based upon the experience of Jesus. But before we offer suggestions for such a structure, we must address four issues: the issue of function, the issue of context, the issue of syncretism, and the issue of the interpretive role of the community of faith (Hiebert 1987:110).

There are three possible functions for a contextualized ritual process based on the Shin Byu ceremony: (1) it could function exclusively as a rite of passage for the young into adult participation in the community of faith; (2) it could be designed as a discipling structure for new converts; or (3) it could serve both of these discipling functions.

Using several of the ways a Christian community might respond as suggested by Hiebert (1987:110), we may imagine the Shin Byu ceremony's being considered for adaptation in two contexts: (1) a community of believers from a Buddhist culture which had used the ceremony before it accepted the gospel; and (2) a community of believers from a different cultural background. In the first context, the community of faith would be evaluating its own cultural form; in the second context, a community of faith would be considering the Shin Byu ceremony as a functional substitute for a cultural form of its own.

If the Shin Byu ceremony is to be adopted by a Buddhist culture in which it is already indigenous, the question of syncretism, or bonding to the wrong meaning, must be addressed. The community of faith knows, for example, that parents and sponsors of initiates in the ceremony plan to get merit from the ceremony, a prospect that is out of harmony with biblical Christianity. Hiebert (1987:110) offers some helpful guidelines for avoiding syncretism, principally based on the importance of Scripture interpreted by the community, aided by leaders with a cross-cultural perspective, and guided by the Holy Spirit (110).

For this reason, I want to insist that I offer below an adaptation of the Shin Byu ceremony for Christian formation *only* as an example of what might be appropriate both in contexts where the Shin Byu ceremony is indigenous and in contexts where it is not. It should not be adopted in a way that obviates the indispensable role of the community of faith following the process outlined by Hiebert and summarized above.

I turn now to the task of constructing a ritual process for discipling children in the process of becoming adult Christians, or for discipling new converts in the process of becoming full members of the community of faith, or for discipling both groups of believers into more mature Christians. Because of the crucial interpretive role of the community of faith, I present my construction in response to two interpretive questions.

How important are the communal festivities connected with the Shin Byu rite?

Obviously, the Shin Byu ceremony is a festive occasion for the whole community. A controlling motivation for these festivities is the merit gained by parents and sponsors. The passage of male and female initiates also dominates the ceremony as a purpose. Entertainment and spiritual insight also play important roles in the celebration. The orchestration of symbols in props, actions, songs, and sermons provides powerful tools for the formation of initiates and other participants alike. In addition, the festivities preliminary to the core initiatory rite itself provide excellent symbols effecting a ritual transition from everyday time and space to that of the rite.

Community leaders who possess an awareness of the dynamics of ritual process can help the interpretive community see the value of these communal festivities. The community must be able to provide invitations, decorations, music, sermons, and ritual words, actions, and objects which convey Christian meaning for these communal festivities.

Do the Scriptures provide adequate materials as functional substitutes for the powerful images in the Shin Byu ceremony?

The male initiate in the Shin Byu ceremony reenacts the experience of the Buddha, even becoming a member of the Buddha's community (*sangha*) for a time. In the process he travels the path that the Buddha traveled. The whole ceremony is orchestrated to facilitate his journey. The palace constructed on the first day sets the stage by symbolizing the wealth and power which the Buddha renounced. The initiates' heads are shaved, they are instructed in meditation, and they don the robes of the *sangha*.

These symbols are effective because they are powerful; they "participate in that to which they point in the power of that to which they point" (Tillich 1955:116, as cited in Eliade 1959:97, n.15). The interpretive community must search the Scriptures and Christian tradition for similarly effective symbols. For a Christian community with a monastic tradition, the solution may be more parallel to those of the Shin Byu ceremony. But adequate symbols must be found to carry the weight of the important task of discipling.

Identifying with Christ is a dominant theme in Scripture and Christian tradition. Could initiates identify with Christ as they make the transition to full and/or adult Christian identity?

Four inaugural events in the life of Jesus as narrated by Luke appear to be both parallel to the Great Going Forth of the Buddha and appropriate for a biblically based rite of initiation.¹⁹ These events possess considerable symbolic force and are therefore appropriate for a rite of Christian initiation and formation which promises bonding to meaning for initiates and the community of faith of which they are a part.

1. Separation from Parents (Luke 2:41-52)

Jesus and his family's journey to Jerusalem for the Passover ends in apparent disaster as Jesus' parents leave him behind. When, after an anxious search, his parents find him in the temple courts discussing with the elders, and his mother chides him, Jesus' reply suggests (marks) the validity of

separation from parents: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49b). This has obvious implications for children making the passage to adult Christians; can it be made meaningful for the discipling of adult converts also?

2. *Baptism* (Luke 3:21-22)

Jesus' baptism in Luke 3 comes between a window into the ministry of his cousin John (3:1-20) and a detailed presentation of Jesus' genealogy (3:23-37). Can this event be worked into a rite of passage based on identifying with Jesus? Scripture makes clear that the believer is a son or a daughter of God in Christ; thus, the saying of the voice to Jesus would be appropriate: "You are my son/daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (3:22b).

3. *Solitary Ordeal* (Luke 4:1-13)

Before Jesus begins his ministry, he must be tested. The Spirit who fills him (4:1a) also leads him into the solitude of the desert (4:1b). There he is tempted during a forty-day fast (4:2). As I mentioned above in the phenomenology of a rite of passage, an ordeal is often an important feature of the liminal phase of the rite. Can an ordeal of solitude and fasting be made a part of our discipling rite?²⁰

4. *Proclamation in the Power of the Spirit* (Luke 4:14-30)

After his solitary ordeal, Jesus returns home to Nazareth in the power of the Spirit and initiates his ministry by preaching in the synagogue there. He reads a passage of Scripture and applies it to himself (4:16-21). In the interactions that follow with his people, he has the courage to speak boldly and to stand on his own against opposition (4:17-30).

Can our Christian initiation and formation rite bring initiates back before the congregation of the faithful to speak courageously from Scripture of their Christian conviction and vocation—in the power of the Spirit?

There is a sense in which this structure—separation from parents, baptism and ordeal, return and proclamation—parallels the rite-of-passage structure itself—separation, liminality, reincorporation.²¹ Nevertheless, the interpretive community must decide whether it would provide an adequate functional equivalence for the Shin Byu rite. Such a community emerging out of a context where the Shin Byu rite, or one like it was in place, will have to deliberate the issue carefully, for they must insist that the rite function to disciple initiates into deeper Christian formation, and *not* function to distort Christianity by forcing it into the mold of the old order of meaning. The process must contribute to the bonding to Christian meaning.

Conclusion

Jesus commissioned his followers to disciple the nations through baptism and teaching (Matthew 28:19-20). Since his time, both ritual and didactic means have been used in that process. In contexts where churches are emerging from among people of traditional religious background, the ritual process may be very important in that process. I have tried to

demonstrate in this article by precept and example that the rite-of-passage structure represents a significant ritual and pedagogical resource for Christian formation, or bonding to meaning.

Notes

1. Another student of mine, a D. Min. candidate from Texas, also laments what he calls "the revolving door problem": as fast as new believers enter the front door, others leave out the back. Allen J. Swanson's (1989:54) extensive survey of church growth in Taiwan, which sampled 200 churches and nearly eight thousand laypersons, covered 14 percent of all non-mountain churches in that country. He found that even though evangelistic efforts had recorded many decisions for Christ, few converts had remained "to become 'disciples.'" In spite of optimum conditions, including a wide-ranging evangelistic campaign conducted by Billy Graham which resulted in some twenty thousand decisions for Christ, the church grew by only one thousand members in a two-year period. I am interested in the fact that the detailed surveys and interviews, perhaps because they were designed to correlate evangelism and convert retention, gave no attention to the impact of rituals of member incorporation into the churches.

2. Biblical quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

3. See Thomas V. Peterson's (1987) discussion of infant baptism as an occasion for the whole community to reflect upon the question, "What does it mean to be a Christian in a world of sin?" (82). The ritual process of adult baptism represents an even more obvious shaping event for the community of faith. Kenneth Tollefson (1990) finds the three independent variables of evangelism in the great commission, associating each with a phase of a rite of passage structure: preaching (separation), teaching (transition), and baptizing (incorporation). He also points out that baptism is associated in the New Testament with each of the three phases: separation (Romans 6:2-7), transition (Titus 3:5), and incorporation (1 Corinthians 12:13) (324). I focus here on baptism as ritual process, a process integral to the discipling task—a process distinct from, but not necessarily separate from, the more typically, but not exclusively, didactic process of teaching.

4. According to Swanson (1989:57, 58) converts to Christianity in Taiwan (see note 1 above) with roots in another religious system tended to integrate into a Christian community to a higher degree than did those who prior to their conversion held no religious convictions. Swanson correlates this with the fact that converts who were baptized and became participating members of the Christian community had had a high level of discontent with their traditional religion. This indicates that traditional religious people may be more ripe for bonding with a community of Christian faith because of their appreciation, consciously or unconsciously, for participation in religious rites and activities. Swanson reports that "almost one-half of those who converted and remained formerly belonged to a local folk religion. About two-thirds of those who left had no former religious convictions of any kind" (57). According to Victor Turner (1982a:31, 41), a distinction should be made between societies which have developed before the Industrial Revolution and those which have developed since it. Although I believe that what I have to present in this article is relevant to both such societies, it may be more relevant to those which have developed before the Industrial Revolution.

5. The rite-of-passage structure extends far beyond those rites which mark these most obvious and common passages. Rites which mark the coming of the new year, a new season, or a new month are also rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960:178-182). The Jewish Sabbath provides a classic example of the rite-of-passage structure.

Ceremonies of initiation and induction into societies and organizations (Van Gennep 1960:74ff.; Eliade 1958:61-80), as well as initiations of individuals and groups into offices and professions (Van Gennep 1960:101-115; Eliade 1958:81-102) fit the pattern. The virtually archetypal phenomenon of the pilgrimage fits this pattern in a striking way (E. Turner 1987:328). Even the typical pattern of worship prevailing across cultures fits this rite-of-passage model (Ellwood 1983:120-122; Nichols 1985).

6. In classical Hinduism there are in fact sacramental events (*samskaras*) effecting 44 such passages (Banerjee 1979:139-188; Basham 1963:159-177; Pandey 1958:390-413).

7. The experience of adolescence in North America and in other post-industrial societies teaches us that just as it is difficult to negotiate the passage from childhood to adulthood when social statuses are not suspended for a time by rituals of separation, so it is difficult to facilitate the socialization of the young into adults with the physical and social liminality of adolescence contaminating the process. For North American disciplers, a ritual process enabling the passage of children to adulthood can then be seen not only as a structure impounding the prevailing social structure so that mentors can concentrate upon shaping children into adults, but also as a structure concentrating the liminality of adolescence in the lock of ritual liminality between the gates of ritual separation and reintegration.

8. Victor Turner's term for this is *communitas*, a Latin word meaning roughly "a sense of community" and distinguished from a geographically determined community (V. Turner 1977:96, 97; V. Turner and E. Turner 1978:250ff.). Turner discovered that human beings the world over find the *communitas* of liminality enriching and seek consistently to effect such a sense of community for themselves. The sense of common humanity in it offers a welcome respite from the often rigid social structures prevailing under the regime of social structure—what we might call profane time. In fact, *communitas* functions for Turner as a near synonym of anti-structure.

9. Anyone who has participated in an ashram, Walk to Emmaus, Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, or a well-orchestrated retreat understands this uncanny sense of common humanity which prevails within the ritual borders of the liminal state.

10. Emphasis is mine.

11. Bonding to meaning is not Peterson's term.

12. Peterson uses the term "puzzle" (an interrogative metaphor) here. In an initiation, puzzles are presented both to the initiates and to their communities which effect a renewal of their metaphorical quest for meaning. Peterson suggests that in the vision quest of Lame Deer, childhood's naive realism about symbolism is questioned in favor of a deeper understanding of the relation between symbol and reality. Citing Sam Gill (1967:6), Peterson (1987:79) suggests that initiation rites destroy simplistic and literal interpretations of religion, initiating a lifelong quest for meaning. In an Australian aboriginal initiation, for example, the awesome bullroarers are unmasked as "humanly contrived noise makers" (79).

13. In focusing here on meaning, I do not intend to "idolize the 'higher' senses" or denigrate "the tactile, gustatory and kinesthetic aspects of liturgy" which, according to Ronald L. Grimes (1982:5), Christian ritual tends to do. In contrast, I am arguing for a bonding to meaning which goes beyond an understanding of it. Such bonding is a function of the tactile, gustatory, and kinesthetic aspects of the kind of ritual process exemplified in a rite of passage.

14. Tollefson (1990:321), like Finn (1989: passim), cites the *Church Order of Hippolytus* as historical evidence for the effectiveness of rites of passage for "quality control" over Christian converts.

15. In the television video series *The Long Search*, Ronald Eyre and his crew filmed a similar rite of passage in Sri Lanka (Eyre 1977).

16. According to the data collected by Spiro (1970:246-247), the range of duration for an initiate's stay in the monastic community (*sangha*) of 52 initiates from the Burmese village of Yeigi was from one day to many years, with an average duration of a little more than a year. The trend, according to him, is toward shorter periods. For 24 students in the government school, the period ranged from 2 to 15 days. According to Spiro (1970:235) the greater the *duration*, the more merit the parents and sponsors acquire.

17. In fact, the merit-gaining aspect of the ceremony may outweigh its passage function. While the ceremony is supposed to be performed about the time of puberty, a time appropriate for its passage function, in fact, the age at which children go through it varies widely. The upper age limit is often due to lack of wealth. On the other end of the scale, a child might be initiated at the age of two, for example, because his parents have plenty of money and wish to perform two ceremonies in order to gain more merit, one at this early age and another when the child reaches puberty (Spiro 1970:235).

18. I am aware of the difficulties involved in creating ritual (Grimes 1982:1-17). But Grimes (1982:14-17), himself, found the attempt to do so enriching and educational in his academic setting. Elizabeth M. Roach (1988:173-182) reports on the very successful results of the creative adaptation and relocation of the festival of Pentecost in Samoa.

19. Tollefson (1990:322-323) cites the baptism, temptation, and subsequent public ministry of Jesus in Galilee as an exemplary biblical example of a rite-of-passage structure.

20. "The Vision Quest" is a familiar part of Native American rites of passage (see references above to the vision quest of Lame Deer in the discussion of Peterson [1987]). Foster and Little (1987) have developed this event into a rite of passage for North American adolescents. The liminal phase of this rite involves a solo fast in the wilderness of three days and three nights (1987:79, 88-103). According to Tollefson (1990:319), Peter Farb (1968:73) holds that pain and suffering are essential ingredients in the pedagogy of puberty rites. They serve as mnemonic aids to the preservation of vital cultural knowledge.

21. See note 18 above.

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