

# Chapter 1

## The Origins and Content of Liminal Theory in Social Anthropology

The phrase “rite of passage” has become familiar in the English language to denote, in often a fairly incoherent and unformed way, what a human being must go through to change their social status in some manner, via a trial or even traumatic experience of some sort. In this chapter we intend to define the ideas associated with the anthropological study of rites of passage much more closely and carefully. We justify using anthropology as a starting point for practical theology since it is the study of the phenomena of human behavior and therefore we begin with *experience*. For a justification of anthropology’s usefulness as a discipline in missiology and, by extension practical theology, see Rooms (2012). The chapter will also include describing the meaning of related terms such as liminality, *communitas* and the liminoid. In addition, we will offer a short critical review of the literature of how anthropologists and others have used and understood the terms since they were originally defined in premodern African tribal societies. This important work will set the foundations for the rest of the book.

Most of the material in this chapter is inevitably derived from the work of anthropologists and is summarized here for our purposes in this book. Students who wish to delve a little deeper would do well to revisit the primary sources for two reasons: first, because of the anthropologists’ sheer hard work and commitment required to hammer out these concepts in long-term

field work which resulted in the ideas coming to light; second, we, the authors are not anthropologists and lay no claim to be so. The understanding of liminal theory we offer here is from our perspective as Christian disciples, Christian ministers and practical theologians, no more and no less.

*Age-mate Rituals as the Basis for Liminal Theory*

We have already noted that the term “rites of passage” was originally coined by Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) in his 1909 work, *Les Rites de Passage*. The best way to introduce the ideas associated with rites of passage is to describe one of the many tribal rituals they originated from; the study of a typical coming-of-age process for males<sup>1</sup> in a traditional African tribe. The following description is generic in that it is not associated with any specific tribal practice but conglomerates what happens in general for our purposes in this book.

The transition from child to adult is one which all societies must negotiate, not least because of the physical changes which enable procreation to take place in the nascent adults. Work and responsibility too may take on a new meaning. African societies have traditionally marked this transition quite starkly and perhaps it is this very starkness which has helped elucidate the liminal theory which has arisen from it.<sup>2</sup>

The process is presided over by the designated elders of the tribe who mark out an “age-mate” group of adolescent males. The process does not happen every year but rather every few years when a sufficiently large cohort is deemed “ready.” Plans are made and the secret location for the training “camp” in the bush is suitably prepared.

On the appointed night the chosen boys in the age-mate group are “stolen” from their beds in their village compound and marched out into the bush in what must be a frightening experience. Not least because they may have anticipated it, but would have had

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1. We recognize that choosing research amongst males raises the question of gender bias and therefore needs to be interpreted critically. On the other hand, while such rites for females do not vary that much in the process, they are highly controversial as they involve mutilation.
  2. We shall need to assess this claim critically later in the chapter as the location of the original research is somewhat problematical for the wider application of the ideas formed from it.

no inkling of the day or hour. Certain chosen elders deemed wise enough for the task then teach the age-mate group for several days or even weeks at the secret camp. Topics such as what it means to take up the male adult role in the tribe, marriage, sex, and the responsibilities of parenthood are covered. Tests of strength and skill and other initiation rites may have to be undertaken.

The age-mate group as a whole may be given a name which each member will identify with for the rest of their life (each boy may also be individually named temporarily for the duration of the camp). It does not matter whose sons they were, they are all bonded together now through this common experience and take the name associated with their particular group.

The place for the teaching, the camp, is a secret place, known only to the elders, arrived at at night to disorientate the participants as to its location. It is deeply frowned upon for anyone to happen across it or, even worse, seek out its location.

Once the teaching is complete a ritual ceremony is performed (always at the same secret location) which now marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. Often it involves physical circumcision, with the participants expected not to show emotion or pain as the act is performed on them.

The culminating ritual over, the whole group then returns to the village and there is much rejoicing and celebration for the boys, who left in the night as children and now return as men, able to take on their adult roles in securing the future of village.

Van Gennep, when studying these rites of passage, identified three important stages in this process:

1. separation—the boys are removed from the village at night;
2. margin or *limen*—the liminal stage in the secret location of the camp; and
3. reaggregation—the men return triumphantly after the circumcision ceremony.

Thus, it was van Gennep (2010 [1960]) who first coined the term liminality based on the Latin *limen* for edge or threshold. The metaphor employed here is the doorstep—the threshold between the inside and outside. While the three designations primarily refer to the ritualistic stages of the rites of passage, van Gennep also looked at the whole process from the perspective

of the *limen* itself. Therefore, they can be named the *pre-liminal*, *liminal*, and *post-liminal*, which normalizes the liminal in relation to what happens before and after, rather reversing the usual state of affairs (Turner, 2009 [1969]: 166).

### *Structure, Anti-structure and Communitas*

Victor Turner, as we noted in the Introduction developed van Gennep's work in several directions. Turner did his field work by living in Zambia and studying the Ndembu tribe and its rituals.<sup>3</sup> His studies are noted for the excellence of detail in describing the behavior that creates his theories. Turner labels the boys in the liminal phase as being "threshold people" (2009 [1969]: 95). This is the betwixt and between state—neither here nor there. They exist between the "positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial."

He defines the liminal phase further for the neophytes undergoing the rite of passage:

1. It carries a rich array of symbolism—often around death, darkness and the wilderness.
2. There is a stripping down to nothing—the boys may wear few or no clothes.
3. They must behave passively and be prepared to be punished for no reason.
4. There are ordeals and tests, culminating in the circumcision designed to show that "man thou art dust!" (Turner, 1974a: 53)
5. There is intense comradeship, life-long bonding and egalitarianism demonstrated amongst the initiates as we have noted.
6. The whole liminal period is freighted with sacredness and holiness, the transcendent.

Turner's key contribution to the theory of liminality is then to juxtapose the structure of the pre- and post-liminal phases with the anti-structure of the liminal. Structure and anti-structure have

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3. Deflem (1991: 2) expands: "In 1950 the Turners moved to the Mukanza village in the Mwinilunga district of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia)" to begin his Ph.D. research which would eventually result, via a roundabout route, in his major work *The Ritual Process*.

quite complex origins and definitions in the anthropological field. For our purposes we can understand structure in Turner's terms as: "society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions." Anti-structure is: "society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured . . . community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (2009 [1969]: 96).

Turner importantly makes no value judgment on the relationship between structure and anti-structure (at least at this stage in his work)—declaring the one only has negative connotations when seen from the vantage point of the other (1974a: 50). In an important moment of definition, he names the relationality found in the "society" of the liminal phase *communitas*.

Turner deliberately does not use the word community, preferring the Latin term *communitas* to "distinguish this modality of social relationship from an 'area of common living.'" He goes on to point out that the juxtaposition of social relations in structure and *communitas* is not simply comparable to secular/sacred or religion/politics dichotomies. Sacredness permeates all three phases, and the offices of which they are made up, but there is a turning upside down which occurs in the whole movement. The passive humiliation endured in the liminal phase by the initiates has a fundamental purpose: that they take that humility into their new-found roles in the structure of their society. An important point is made here which is worth quoting in full (2009 [1969]: 97):

Something of the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over, and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office [e.g., adult men as opposed to boys]. This is not . . . a matter of giving a general stamp of legitimacy to a society's structural positions. It is rather a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.

Turner continues to develop this theme which brings us to the heart of his theory:

Social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. The passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness. In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable.

So far so good, Turner has identified a human dialectic by researching in a traditional African tribe. The question is can what he discovered there be universalized from that starting point. We shall need to return to this question later, for the moment we note Turner's attempts to do this through examining a worldwide range of cultural phenomena from pilgrimage and monasticism through to hippiedom. Turner therefore identifies two further types of liminality and three different kinds (or "modalities") of *communitas*. It is the types of *communitas* which we shall present here first before looking at the two liminalities (2009 [1969]: 132):

1. Existential or spontaneous *communitas*
2. This kind of *communitas* breaks out when something new happens to a group of people—he notes the hippies of his era (the 1960s) call it exactly that—"a happening."
3. Normative *communitas*
4. In this case over time the existential *communitas* is organized into a "perduring social system." Here Turner discusses the Franciscan monastic community and its nuanced dealing with normalizing its initial spontaneous *communitas*.<sup>4</sup>
5. Ideological *communitas*
6. The ideological turn in *communitas* is found in a "variety of utopian models of societies based on existential *communitas*"—such as in millenarian movements.

It is important to note that normalizing and ideological *communitas* are, in Turner's understanding, a move towards structure from the initial existential experience of *communitas* (2009 [1969]: 132-33):

4. Turner claims that St. Francis was actually attempting to compel his friars to remain in a "permanently liminal state."

Both normative and ideological *communitas* are already within the domain of structure, and it is the fate of all spontaneous *communitas* in history to undergo what most people see as a “decline and fall” into structure and law. In religious movements of the *communitas* type, it is not only the charisma of the leaders that is “routinized” but also the *communitas* of their first disciples and followers.

Turner completes his book, *The Ritual Process*, by outlining two different kinds of liminality in human cultures (2009 [1969]: 166ff). There is the liminality of status elevation which is largely what was happening in the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, and we could think of ordination as just such liminality (Davies, 2002: 124—although we might want to question the nature of the “elevation” theologically, since the priest can be understood as a liminal figure). Second, there is a liminality of status reversal which is associated with cyclical or calendrical rites that occur at different seasons through the year. A good example he cites is the role of preadolescent children in the “trick or treat” ritual at Hallowe’en where they are allowed a status and a power not normally associated with their place in society (2009 [1969]: 172). The role of the trickster, joker or fool throughout history and literature is also a good example of status reversal.

Thoughtful readers will have noticed the rituals Turner was researching among the Ndembu were embedded in their total society, were agreed by everyone and those undergoing them had no choice about the matter. The rituals dramatize the required transformation, often by turning upside down the fundamental principles of the social order. It is not that they are totally fixed or static as one of Turner’s key moves is to show how ritual was involved in the making of “society” over against the structuralist assumptions of some of his anthropologist predecessors. Thus, another of the themes of Turner’s overall work is that society is fluid and proceeds via a series of what he terms “social dramas” or periods of intermittent change and conflict that erupt from time to time. For the Ndembu were by no means a unified group; there was a great deal of internal conflict and contestation between their villages.

Such dramas have four phases (whether they are resolved or not), which Turner identified among the Ndembu and then extended further afield (1974a: 37-42):



1. a breach of regular norm-governed social relations occurs between persons or groups of a social unit (a village, office, factory, congregation);
2. a crisis occurs or an extension of the breach, unless the conflict can be sealed off quickly from the rest of the unit;
3. redressive action mechanisms are brought into operation by leading members of the social group, while escalation can also still occur; and
4. reintegration of the disturbed social group or social recognition of an irreparable breach or schism (the congregation, for instance, splits and one part forms a new version of the church).

*The Liminoid, Critiques of Victor Turner and the Postmodern Turn*

Deflem (1991: 22) helpfully summarizes Turner's overall contribution to anthropological thought in relation to both ritual and social dramas:

It was Turner's notion of social drama in combination with van Gennep's influential work on rites of passage which, I believe, led Turner to analyze ritual not simply as a mechanism of redress, but as humanly meaningful cultural performances of an essentially processual nature. Ritual not only takes place within a social process but is itself processual. In his studies of the liminal phase in ritual, Turner showed that ritual is not just a response to society's needs but involves humanly meaningful action.

Ritual, however, does not function in the same fashion in what Turner calls "industrial" societies which are fragmented and, most importantly, religion, law, economics and politics are distinct social entities. Thus, in returning to work in the West and developing his thought on a much wider scale, and under some critical pressure as to the relevance and applicability of his theories, Turner began to use the word liminoid to describe phenomena that had a liminal character, but not in its total form as he had come to understand it (1974b). While maintaining that religious ritual in the West remained liminal in his terms,<sup>5</sup> Turner

5. Deflem (1991) thinks it is important for understanding Turner's thought



named the liminoid in the leisure experiences of a consumer culture such as music festivals, art exhibitions, theatre, and sporting occasions. Nevertheless, he also wanted to attribute a religiosity or sacredness to these cultural events. For example, attendance at the annual UK Glastonbury music festival has liminal characteristics and its attendees experience *communitas* (and some transcendence, Turner would claim), but attendance cannot be used on a curriculum vitae to show evidence of responsible adulthood—it is then liminoid in these terms. Deflem (1991) claims that Turner, in this later period in his life also began to expect that the *communitas* associated with liminoid experiences could harness its powerful human energy for social change.

The introduction of the liminoid into Turner's thought is controversial for several reasons. First, it is underresearched in the field compared to Turner's painstaking work with the Ndembu. Second, it is not difficult to see that the relationship of structure to *communitas* in the liminoid is not as clear cut as Turner would have it. To use the example of music festivals—they are easily captured and co-opted by the capitalist economic forces of structure that recognize a moneymaking opportunity when they see one. Third, it is unclear why the truly liminal should be confined to the religious sphere alone in industrial societies; some wholly secular ceremonies, such as, say, a university graduation, could be understood to be liminal in Turner's sense (Deflem, 1991). Fourth, perhaps all structure is not totally devoid of elements of *communitas*—the human and personal element behind the roles it creates. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, not all *communitas* is creative and renewing of society—we can think of destructive cults and sects where human souls are de-personified and treated destructively and sometimes murder or mass suicide ensue.

A further critique of Turner is made by Australian anthropologist Graham St. John when he accuses him, with others, of being at least overly idealist and probably essentialist in his views on the *limen* (2001: 48):

the *limen*, the *leitmotif* in Turner's theoretical firmament, 'acquired transcendent value and became depicted as that which was quintessentially real, a kind of primal

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that he converted from communism to Roman Catholicism in his mid-life.

unity'. Turner's 'liminal ritual' was a pure, ideal category. Inflexible application tends to disregard 'complicated' performative spaces and intra-event strife.

St. John goes on to critique Turner's application of liminal theory to the historical development of pilgrimage (see 1974a) which he saw as one of the bridges between tribal religion and modern society. Once again Turner's vision of the social unification and de-hierarchicalization of the *communitas* relations on pilgrimage simply does not ring true—and those who have conducted field research in the area confirm this. The liminality actually created is a *contested* space as it is in the annual alternative lifestyle festival that St. John is studying. So, we enter the postmodern age with the concept of liminality—it does not disappear but St. John "goes beyond" it. Power relations matter in liminal space, many people believe African boys and girls should have the chance these days to question whether they should be circumcised or not (or indeed actively resist it altogether).

Nevertheless St. John still recognizes the basic categories of structure and anti-structure, even if he wishes to transpose *communitas* into heterotopias<sup>6</sup>—a contested space which still remains liminal—betwixt and between.

In a fascinating article, South African practical theologian Cas Wepener (2012) traces the application of the concept of liminality to the societal transition that South Africa has made from the end of apartheid through efforts at reconciliation to the current time. Using the work of various authors, anthropologists and theologians who have utilized the concept, he shows how, he thinks, it may now have reached the limit of its usefulness. For us, what the article demonstrates is another example of the movement between the dialectic of structure and *communitas* where we are constantly tempted to "reify" one or the other at any given time. Thus, we have the accusation of the anthropologist Grimes (referenced by Wepener, 2012: 205) that the three-stage schema of van Gennep and Turner in ritual:

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6. St. John also accuses Turner of undertheorizing the role of the body in liminality. However, it is clear that the Ndembu rituals were deeply embodied if they included such highly physical acts as circumcision. St. John is interested in the contested use of sex and sexuality at the festival he researched which does point to a simple change of emphasis in the role of the body rather than any avoidance of it by Turner.

is a total oversimplification and a typically Western philosophical approach that derives from the Hegelian dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), which ultimately imposes these logo centric patterns on ritual traditions where they do not fit. “In short, *invented* patterns, treated as if they were *discovered*, came to be *prescribed* as if they were laws determining how rites should be structured.” (Grimes’ italics in the original, see Grimes, 2002: 107)

What this schema fails to recognize and where Grimes is right (his whole book is a very effective updating of ritual theory) is that the synthesis is simply another form of thesis to which there can be another antithesis. We have interplay in social processes in what we could imagine as a rollercoaster or a spiral hermeneutic which is neverending—and which we see in Chapter Three is a highly useful metaphor for our purposes.

We can now interact with a final postmodern interlocutor of liminality—Marcel Barnard (2010). He traces the journey of liminality from Turner into the postmodern era but, curiously, does not discuss the liminoid. What is most suggestive about his work are two ideas. One is that liminality works for the theologian as a heuristic concept. Here we have a resonance with Carson’s work referred to in the Introduction; liminality as a hermeneutical key and pastoral method. The heuristic nature of liminality is constructive against the critiques of it that we have been reviewing. Something is used heuristically when a simple phenomenon, an experiential reality is theorized for a particular end or to answer a question or problem. The end or the solution may not be the most optimal or the best one available and as long as this is understood working heuristically is a perfectly acceptable method.

This is indeed what we are learning about using liminality in our current age after van Gennep and Turner—it arises from experience which is now tested over several decades. It is absolutely not a “theory of everything” and yet it is a useful way of viewing the process of change in persons, organizations and human society.

Second, Barnard claims that liminality has moved to the center of postmodern society from the margin when Turner was writing and that it is now structure that is marginalized. The introduction of the power of the internet and globalization in economics and

information have been recognized by sociologists as offering liquidity or “flow” to society both nationally and internationally (Baumann, 2000)—concepts not unknown, of course, to Turner in his description of *communitas* and processual social drama. We recognize here a further reason for the importance of this book, if this is indeed the case. Barnard, however, may overstate his argument as there is once again a sense in the article that liminality is now “it” — top dog, at the center, and so, once again, there may be an unhelpful value judgment being made.

### *Summarizing Conclusions*

We are now in a position to make some conclusions from this review of the origins of the *limen* and its subsequent critical trajectory in anthropology and practical theology.

Victor Turner presents us with a hypothesis that there is no society without the constant interplay of structure and anti-structure and the liminal which mediates them.

While anthropologists question aspects of this hypothesis, it remains as one heuristic device for understanding human and social change.

The following caveats will apply as we proceed:

- Neither structure nor anti-structure should be endowed with value judgments one against the other.
- We should guard against idealizing any of the elements of this processual movement.
- We need to be on the lookout for disproportionate power relations at play, particularly within the liminal, being careful about the use of *communitas* since it is unlikely ever to be “pure.”

The constant interplay of structure and anti-structure and the liminal which mediates them in our hypothesis might better be construed, for our purposes, as a “polarity” (Johnson, 1992) rather than a dialectic. Polarities are not “problems to be solved” as an either/or, rather they need to be managed (in the business world that Johnson is working in) as a both/and. Many similar polarities exist, both practical and theological—e.g., self/team, contract/covenant, and grace/law. Both poles have positive and negative aspects when they are emphasized one against the other so that

a simple four quadrant grid can be drawn up recognizing this. In managing the polarity, movement is made from the positive side of one pole to its negative in the overemphasis which then results in a movement to the positive side of the opposite pole thence to its negative which returns the system to the original positive and so on in an infinite cycle which when drawn on a page, in fact, is the mathematical sign for infinity. We might say that polarities require living with and even dancing between. The majority of this book will be about this dance.

Our hypothesis is then that embedded in human society is a dialectic or polarity of structure and anti-structure, with anti-structure characterized by *communitas* relations—the movement between the two poles has energy and power for good or ill and both sides interpenetrate one another so that it is not always easy to distinguish separate periods or elements of structure and *communitas*.

Neither pole should be reified or essentialized if there is no evidence for it or as if it were an ideal to grasp. The constant interplay of *communitas* and structure is a way of seeing the world and change within it—and, of course, it is not the only way. If we treat the concepts heuristically and critically then we can watch ourselves for when we are tempted to think we have arrived at a final answer to what is happening in our experience or become enthralled by one pole of the dialectic.

Polarity Mapping captures the dynamic flow that is generated by the creative tension between the two poles.

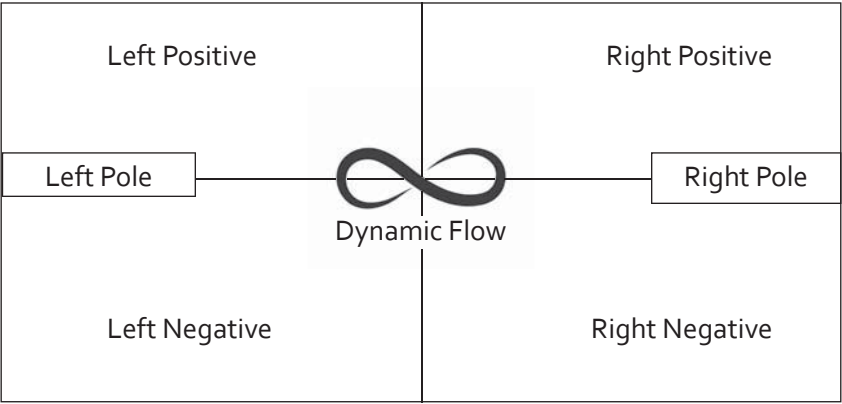


Figure 1. Polarity Management

Finally, we wish to say a word about the transcendent. We write from a faith perspective. This book is not an apologetic for that position nor can we prove, should we even wish to do so, that a faith position is a “true” stance. We are with St. Augustine in having *faith seeking understanding*. If God has made the world and sustains every atom, neutrino and Higgs-Boson in every single moment, we might expect to find God in a phenomenon such as the structure-*communitas* polarity in our hypothesis about human and social change. It is perhaps no accident that Victor Turner also was a person of faith and, while that does not mean we can fail to be critical, it sets our project on a sacred or transcendent basis. Such a stance leads us to offer a theological reflection to both ground and close this chapter in some more concrete, and we hope, familiar realities.

### *A Theological Reflection*

Douglas Davies (2002: 126-7) makes a connection between Turner’s *communitas* and the New Testament term *koinonia*, usually translated as “fellowship.” He notes that liturgical worship tends to express normative *communitas* rather than spontaneous *communitas*, although some traditions seek to reenact spontaneity in their worship.

He, too, is circumspect around transferring the ideas generated in tribal society to today while stating, “generally speaking the idea of *communitas*, whether experienced liminally or in liminoid contexts, is useful when discussing aspects of religious community.”

Davies notes the dialectic between *communitas* and structure in an echo of the hypothesis that we have offered in this chapter:

It was Turner’s conviction that the total flow of social existence moved between *communitas* and hierarchy and back again, and it is precisely the alternations between fixity and flux, between hierarchy and *communitas*, that give power to each state.

Taking Davies’ idea one step further, and in an attempt not to focus solely on one pole of the dialectic, we think it could be fruitful to uncover the New Testament polar opposite equivalent to *koinonia*. Tentatively we suggest here that the equivalent to structure in New Testament terms may be the concepts encapsulated by the word *ekklesia*.

Here are two definitions of the terms:

*Ekklesia* (Coenen, 1986: 299)

This word is hardly found in the Gospels. We might surmise that it is as if the apostles were aware it could not be attributed to the disciples around Jesus before his death and resurrection. While there is an “event” element in the idea of *ekklesia*:

The fact that *ekklesia* has the nature of an event does not, however, exclude the factor of continuity. However little this happening can be commanded by men [*sic*], it nevertheless expresses itself in permanent forms and institutions. Where the *ekklesia* is an event, the institution of the *ekklesia* comes into being and will continue to do so in the expectation that the Lord will continue to make his presence real. Coming together must be reckoned as an essential element in *ekklesia* (cf. 1Cor 11:18). Hence the *ekklesia* can be thought of in purely concrete terms.

*Koinonia* (Schattenmann, 1986: 642)

Once again, the word is not found in the Synoptic Gospels and most important is its use in Acts 2:42ff—this “religious communism of love” (Troeltsch). While *koinonia* can be translated as “liturgical fellowship in worship”:

*koinonia* expresses something new and independent. It denotes unanimity and unity brought about by the Spirit. The individual was completely upheld by the community. The Hellenist Luke clearly had in mind the Pythagoreans and the Essenes. The educated reader would have got the impression that the Greek ideal of society had been realized.

### *Reflective Exercise*

Draw a diagram with the four quadrants as in figure 1. Place fellowship/*communitas* on one side and structure/church on the other.

Fill in the four quadrants.

What factors enhance both poles of the dialectic?

What do you take away from the exercise for your own practice?

Do you think we privilege *communitas* over structure, *koinonia* over *ekklesia* or vice versa? Why might this be?