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A Missed Opportunity

A review on Dimitris Xygalatas, *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*, London: Profile Books, 2022.

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Abstract

This review recognizes that *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living* has many good qualities and relates a story of scholarship that, according to the assertions of the author, heralds a brave new world of interdisciplinary examination of research objects heretofore the traditional and exclusive province of anthropology, comparative religion, and the humanities in general. But despite the seemingly broad sense of acceptance this book claims for the Cognitive Science of Religion, the decades-old field upon which the tenets of this book are based, in reality it betrays itself as a microcosm of a niche-driven interpretation often found in the social sciences and humanities, i.e. dismissing some and ignoring other extant work in order to claim unique subject matter expertise. Unfortunately, that exercise results in the sacrifice of (1) parsimonious explanatory claims and (2) veritable engagement with the already existing and robust interdisciplinary and well-funded research programs addressing ritualized behavior, all to the detriment of the ostensible claims the book makes championing a robust, interdisciplinary epistemological pluralism.

Keywords

interdisciplinarity, parsimony, ritualized behavior, evolutionary science, by-products, Cognitive Science of Religion, endothermy

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The recent offering from the publisher Little, Brown Spark is an intuitive read. It is full of personal anecdotes about the author's experiences as a child and in adulthood and even folksy renditions of academic and administrative events regarding fieldwork plans and their attendant challenges. One anecdote about procuring rupee coins is an exemplar. At the end of the day, the substance of the book *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living* is eminently accessible to the lay reader.

In a review of Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Gopnik 2018), Alison Gopnik suggests that reason, rationality, and, ultimately,

humanism as principles for human progress are insufficient since Enlightenment values result in individuals disinterestedly cooperating with other individuals but abandoning "commitment mechanisms" that facilitate the creation and cultivation of communal attachments. Furthermore, Gopnik asserts that these "commitment mechanisms" that foster connections between kin group members, friends, and local community members are distinct from those that underpin destructive tendencies like nationalism, racism, and bigotry. Her account of the necessity of *emotional* "commitment mechanisms" that are manifest in "small town values" is a nod to the approach *Ritual* takes in trying to situate the motivations and function of human "extreme" ritual behaviour. Gopnik's seemingly secular account of emotional attachments promoting human progress shares a theme with those of hermeneutical anthropologists (such as the author of the current work) and Christian theologians when pressed to name both the threats to, and the necessary factors for, human progress.

In *Ritual* similar epistemological commitments are employed to give an account of "extreme" ritual behaviour and generalise their motivations to all ritual behaviours. The book attempts to use the collection of human biobehavioral data (e.g., heart rate variability) to shoehorn a sort of neo-Durkheimian account of ritual as beneficial social glue into a quasi-evolutionary framework of "shared emotional arousal." One of the book's blanket assertions is the following:

> *Rituals are highly structured. They* require (my emphasis) *rigidity (they must always be performed the 'correct' way), repetition (the same actions performed again and again) and redundancy (they can go on for a long time). In other words, they are predictable.* (p81)

Perhaps what is meant here is that *the characteristics of ritual behaviour include* rigidity, repetition, and redundancy (among other things, one must suppose). While the quotation marks around the word "correct" suggest some disagreement with the rigidity 'requirement', in the subsequent chapter — "Glue" — the narrative downplays the previous recognition that the assertions of practitioners regarding ritual performances, namely, that they remain unchanged over generations, are counterfactual. Instead the emphasis is on the importance of this practitioner, pseudo-historical insistence on the unalterable nature of their rituals as a special type of social glue.

> *This continuity is important. Performing a ritual in the same way as it has always been done makes us part of something not only greater than ourselves but greater even than our entire social world, connecting us to a society of fellows that transcends place and time.* (p107)

But it is difficult to know what this is in the absence of a more precise empirical description of "something greater" and "connecting." At best one can say that the book is appealing to a persistently vague Durkheimian fallacy (Durkheim 1912) that only social facts may

explain social facts — only, of course, if "social facts" include the transcendental. Regardless, because there is no clear reference to a solid research object and nothing new is illuminated, there is simply more data to be explained.

Strikingly, what is most pervasive in this "scientific study of ritual" is the appeal to nonsecular causal entities: social facts, transcendent societies, primordial parts of human nature, life rhythms, ritual social glue, primal human needs, power of ritual, and so on. The reason for this seems to be an attempt to advance an account of ritual behaviour that presumes its beneficial character[1] and setting up, as a foil, a contradictory narrative suggesting that ritual behaviour is wasteful, declining, irrational, and/or destructive.

Similar dichotomies have been produced, notably within anthropology and religious studies. For example, Friday Mbon (1991) examines African societies in general and Nigerian society in particular with a nostalgic and wistful, and even angry, reliance on traditional African socioreligious ethics. The anger is directed (or misdirected) toward Western morals that are characterised by desires for personal comfort and affluence that lead to individualism. According to Mbon the acceptance of Western values in all domains (economic, ethical, governance, etc.) by Africans undermines traditional African moral stances made popular in contemporary scholarly discourse coalescing into the concept of "ubuntu." The outstanding claim of Mbon is that such a traditional African socioreligious ethical system, characterised by the emphasis of communal behaviours and values, juxtaposed with Western disinterestedness in that community, must be "predicated on the respect for the Supreme Being, the ancestors, and the deities" (Mbon 1991, 108).

Similarly John de Gruchy (1977) examines the role of the Christian churches in South Africa within the context of the National Party apartheid administrations. His main worry is the abandonment of communal values (in his case championed by proper Christian theology and teachings) due to the severance of a moral "social message" from the divine (e.g., the teachings of Jesus and the Church). These are two of many examples of a Gopnikesque agenda. What is troubling is that all of these fall squarely out of line with actual, credible scientific endeavours and instead rely on intuitive yet widely resonant "causal" entities (e.g., life rhythms) with a decidedly superhuman flair.

Furthermore, the opportunity to engage with a robust research program related to ritualised behaviour was missed, namely the study of ritualised behaviour spearheaded by Boyer and Liénard's seminal work in Behavioral and Brain Sciences (Boyer and Liénard 2006). This book is not the first in which similar opportunities have been missed. For example Benjamin Ray misses "the opportunity to identify and describe the qualities that ritual participants are required to have by the ritual system in order both to participate in it and to carry out the ritual successfully" (Lawson and McCauley 1990, 53). But highlighting

[1] While the implication is that something that is beneficial equates to being evolutionarily adaptive, there are too many counter examples of ritual behaviour being divisive and destructive to make that claim and so the book mostly suggest that the benefit of ritual is some nebulous feeling that "transcends space and time" rather than actually helping to promote genetic success.

the missed opportunity in this case is apropos, both because of the robust nature of the missed opportunities and the claims of originality and breadth found in *Ritual*.

The Boyer et al. program expanded to a global, interdisciplinary consortium of scholars and institutions, which commanded millions of dollars of research funding from the UK, US, Israel, South Africa, and more. While the size and scope of the program is impressive, that is not what distinguishes it here. What is important is the careful parsimony of its claims and interpretations. Importantly, this includes the by-product framework upon which it rests and an approach mirrored across disciplines and research objects. Approaches to Endothermy (the ability for an organism to generate body heat through a specifically dedicated metabolic activity) are good examples. For instance, Seebacher argues:

> *Endothermy alters the energetic relationships between organisms and their environment and thereby influences fundamental niches. Endothermy is closely tied to energy metabolism. Regulation of energy balance is indispensable for alllife and regulatory pathways increase in complexity from bacteria to vertebrates. Increasing complexity of metabolic networks also increases the probability for endothermic phenotypes to appear. Adaptive arguments are problematic epistemologically because the regulatory mechanisms enabling endothermy have not evolved for the 'purpose' of endothermy and the utility of current traits is likely to have changed over evolutionary time. It is most parsimonious to view endothermy as the evolutionary by-product of energy balance regulation rather than as an adaptation and interpret its evolution in the context of metabolic networks.* (Seebacher 2017, 503)

Unfortunately, the by-product approach to ritualised behaviour is one that *Ritual* briefly describes as "a mental glitch without any adaptive value." (p38) One can only hope this is the result of a simple misunderstanding of evolutionary by-products which are traits of an organism that evolved because they relied upon the standard mechanisms of an adaptation. Further,

> *Unlike adaptations, evolutionary by-products are not the primary targets of natural selection. They have no functional design: they did not originate as solutions to adaptive problems. They only come about through the correlated selection of adaptations, and not because they were, themselves, originally selectively advantageous.* (Leca 2020, 581)

Ritual, though, summarises the Boyer et al. stance as attributing "the human preoccupation with ritual to the misfiring of mental systems" that "on closer examination seems rather unlikely" (p38) before suggesting that the tendency for humans to crave sugar, salt, and fat is example of an "evolutionary" glitch hearkening back to our Palaeolithic brethren. This "craving" does reflect reality, but it is hardly a "misfiring of mental systems".[2] Boyer clearly describes his epistemological commitments relative to much of the study of ritual:

[2] If by "misfiring" the book is suggesting some sort of pathological behaviour, then the "glitch" resulting in the craving of junk food makes the entire human population pathological.

> *Cognitive science and neuroscience suggests a less dramatic but perhaps more empirically grounded picture of religion as a probable, although by no means inevitable by-product of the* normal operation of human cognition. [my emphasis] (Boyer 2008, 124)

In some sense *Ritual* is a case study in such missed opportunities, most notably, to build on existing scholarship in the domain of the scientific and evolutionary study of ritualised behaviour, which includes zoologists, neurobiologists, evolutionary psychologists, economists, historians, scholars of comparative religion, environmental ecologists, cognitive anthropologists, biologists, and more. Examples include work by Szecthman and Woody (Szechtman and Woody 2004) who years previous to *Ritual* used heart rate variability to study human and nonhuman responses to potentially dangerous stimuli within the context of their Security Motivation system research into ritualised behaviour; the work by Lawson and McCauley (Lawson and McCauley 1990), which provided clear criticism of both Durkheim and James (1902) and the lack of parsimony and explicit empirical causal entities in their accounts; work by Don Braxton (2012), which used advanced mobile technologies to study heart rate variability and stress indicators in "extreme" rituals in the field, including pilgrims engaging in highly emotional ritualised re-enactments of the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa in the Old City of Jerusalem, an example of the fairly common type of field research championed by this book; the work of Boyer and Liénard (Boyer and Liénard 2006; Liénard and Boyer 2006), briefly mentioned and discarded as "glitch theory", which advances a comprehensive account of ritualised behaviour (not just "extreme" ritual) using a by-product model of evolutionary science (as discussed previously).

The attempted account of "ritual" in this book fundamentally misunderstands and barely mentions previous robust work, including those embracing by-product models, which severely hampers the ability of the book to consider, pursue, and build upon previous attempts (like those of Boyer and Liénard) to conduct a veritable interdisciplinary study of what the book calls "ritual". "Ritual studies", though, are more helpfully addressed as a carefully identified set of empirically tractable research objects exemplified in the work by David Eilam (Eilam et al. 2011 2012; Eilam 2015), Larry Fiddick (2011), Dan Stein (2011), Steve Neuberg (Neuberg et al. 2011), Jean Decety (Decety et al. 1997), Michal Fux (2015a 2015b 2016), Robert and Caroline Blanchard (2011), Doug Kenrick (Kenrick et al. 2006), Don Ross (2007), and countless others who have been engaging in "an interdisciplinary science of ritual"[3] and that has been an ongoing and robust program for decades.

Broadly, *Ritual* may be taken as a microcosm of mainstream Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). Analyses of ritual behaviour by a large contingent of cognitive scholars of religion are persistently impoverished because the intuitive interpretive methods often criticised within the CSR (McCauley 2017) are ironically still strongly in evidence with the ranks of its researchers. Therefore, the explanatory gap in ritual studies, including the current

[3] The book suggests that it presents "for the first time, an interdisciplinary science of ritual"(page?)

work and elsewhere, remains. (Slone & Mort 2004) It is definitely arguable, as *Ritual* does, that fieldwork is often desirable for data acquisition. But that determination should not be made by employing a simple ranking scheme that always values experiments done in the forest over those in the lab. Rather parsimonious theory generation and stringent methods of experimental design and evaluation are necessary, a component of which is the building of inclusive frameworks for interdisciplinary data integration.

As noted here, there are scholars willing to engage in methods and theories outside constructed disciplinary boundaries, including Boyer, Lawson, McCauley, and others mentioned above. However, interest in purging ritual studies of its residual hermeneutic tendencies has not met tacit and explicit expectations among the pioneers of the field–some of these being Lawson, McCauley, and Boyer whose work, while potentially complementary to extant ritual studies work, is increasingly considered by the mainstream as "on closer examination . . . rather unlikely" (p38) and unmentioned. Ironically, the initial goal of examining and engaging in viable and robust interdisciplinary approaches by abandoning the niche-making insulation of the AAR, NAASR, and other communities that are representative of mainstream scholarship has been taken up by parallel, more recent groups like the IACSR, largely due to an anthropological stance perfectly summed up by the author in a recent NPR interview as the need to study ritual in a "scientific AND human" way. This has made trending away from dubiously postulated causal agents, dual inheritance theory, and cultural evolution models and moving toward Sperberian evolutionary and epidemiological models (Sperber 1985) less evident in the core of ritual studies.

At the end of the day, much of the more recent ritual studies work that attempts to integrate cognitive science is in fact a reinforcement of the generalisations of William James and the sui generis stance of Emile Durkheim with both of their inherent paucity of cognitive considerations, the former's heavy emphasis on uncommon religious behaviours, and the latter's cultural causation and insistence on the independence of magical social facts. In the case of *Ritual* the corresponding components are (1) the heavy focus on existing but infrequent "extreme" rituals as a way to explicate ritual behaviour generally and (2) the question begging reliance on culture (among other things) as a causal entity.

While this all seems rather dour, it is in fact a sign of the good, if incremental, progress that books like this make to the continued critical advancement of the ritual studies, despite the still existing challenges described above. The breadth of institutions with representatives interested in the CSR and described in detail by the author (often via firsthand experience) is impressive and provides opportunity for continuing engagement by more and more disparate disciplines and scholars that might bolster the aims of the CSR and reinvigorate its members. In particular, as noted at the outset, the accessibility of *Ritual* is itself a boon to broader engagement. Even the missed opportunities that characterise much of this work provide a platform for progress. While the current study of "extreme" rituals misses the opportunity to comprehensively consolidate evidence, it is a sincere attempt to grasp the incredible opportunity to "save" heretofore disciplinary-specific data and integrate it with seemingly disparate disciplinary evidence for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary

theoretical stance that actually reflects the interdisciplinary character of cognitive science generally. (McCauley 2013)

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