

Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living, by Dimitris Xygalatas



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Dimitris Xygalatas is an anthropologist and cognitive scientist interested in religion, ritual, music, and sports fandom among other topics. Xygalatas's book *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living* (Profile Books, 2022; henceforth *Ritual*) results from years of rigorous ethnographic and experimental work. *Ritual* follows the perspective of the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion (hereafter referred to as CESR) and brings the reader up-to-date findings in the naturalistic study of religion and rituals. Xygalatas follows a neo-Darwinian and functionalistic approach to the study of religion, whose theoretical premises he describes in a way that is accessible even to the lay public throughout the book, but mainly in its second chapter.

Xygalatas deeply discusses the role of ritual, individual or collective, in evolution, history, culture, and society. He has devoted a large portion of his career to studying extreme rituals, that is, rituals involving high emotional and physical strain, which may or may not be directly related to religion. Enduring physical suffering in the form of

walking on burning coals, piercing parts of the body with needles and hooks, or voluntarily exposing oneself to painful insect bites, etc., is typical for extreme rituals. In particular, the author has studied thoroughly the fire-walking rituals and the extreme rituals on the island of Mauritius.

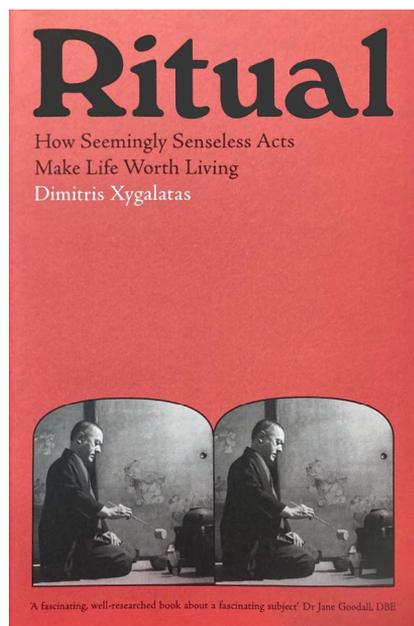
In the book, Xygalatas asks the following questions among others: What are the origins of rituals? Do rituals help maintain and strengthen social cohesion? What is the role of extreme rituals in human societies? Are people performing extreme rituals more prosocial? What is the relationship between participation in extreme rituals and social status or attractiveness? To answer these questions briefly, Xygalatas argues in favour of rituals as mechanisms promoting social cohesion, in-group cooperation and prosocial behaviour, and as instruments to acquire control over activities whose outcome is more difficult to predict. Xygalatas argues for the rituals, religious or non-religious, including extreme rituals, to be an important part of our societies and an inherent part of our existence as human beings.

In 2012, Xygalatas published a major monograph entitled *The Burning Saints: Cognition and Culture in the Fire-Walking Rituals of the Anastenaria* (Routledge, 2012; henceforth *The Burning Saints*) dealing with fire-walking rituals in Greece, Spain, and Bulgaria from the CESR perspective. While *The Burning Saints* is aimed primarily at scholars engaged in the scientific study of religion, *Ritual* is, in my humble opinion, more accessible to a wider range of readers. First and foremost, of course, *Ritual* is of interest to scholars engaged in CESR. Secondly, it is an excellent gateway book for scholars studying religion from a different theoretical and methodological perspective than CESR. Thirdly, it is also one of the best and most accessible publications to the lay public concerning CESR because Xygalatas explains even complex theoretical concepts in clear and understandable language.

The author does not only discuss theoretical concepts and methodological approaches in the naturalistic study of rituals. The book is replete with ethnographic and historical examples of rituals that the author analyses thoroughly. In the final chapter, Xygalatas addresses the function of rituals in the 21st century, including the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. I humbly believe that this section could have been more extensive. Nonetheless, through nine chapters and 268 pages of text, Xygalatas draws the reader in with a clear and pervasive writing style.

It should be said that the author's aim is not to present a comprehensive overview

of the anthropological, psychological, or sociological theories of ritual. Xygalatas's aim is to present current findings in CESR and thus to argue in favour of a naturalistic study of rituals and religion as an approach with a strong interdisciplinary focus and explanatory potential. In conclusion, *Ritual* is a brilliant demonstration of how one book can communicate current scientific knowledge to the general public and at the same time be a major contribution to the scientific and naturalistic study of ritual and religion.



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