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DIMITRIS XYGALATAS:

Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living
London: Profile Books, 2022, 320 p.

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Imagine the following scenario. In the midsummer of fierce, parching heat on the Greek island of Tinos, people dressed in black are crawling right all the way from the quayside to the top of a steep hill where an Orthodox church stands. Their limbs are bleeding and their bodies are exhausted. The crucial question is: why do people participate in rituals that are costly and can even be very painful?

Through this evocative opening scene, underlined by the central “why” question (p. 13), Dimitris Xygalatas starts his new book, *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living* (2022). In comparison to his previous book, *The Burning Saints: Cognition and Culture in the Fire-Walking Rituals of the Anastenaria* (Xygalatas, 2012), which focused predominantly on the fire-walking rituals in a specific socio-cultural environment, the book *Ritual* comprises nine chapters providing profuse findings from diverse scientific disciplines – Xygalatas’ expertise accumulated throughout years of research in various cultural contexts – and what’s more, all of this enriched by his personal experience and observations from everyday life.

In the first eponymous chapter, Xygalatas presents *The Ritual Paradox*: even though people consider rituals important, they are usually unable to say why. Moreover, rituals may seem meaningless, having no direct influence on the physical world (p. 16). This stands in opposition to habits, in which actions and goals are *causally transparent*, meaning that the behaviour is conducted because of its immediate function. Rituals, nevertheless, are *causally opaque* – they hold transformative power on more subtle, symbolic levels (p. 6). Thus, they can affect the inner worlds of individuals and the social dynamic of communities and subsequently shape the outer world (p. 17). Apart from that, ritual is introduced as a human universal. From the cradle to the grave, human life is intertwined with rituals: naming the newborn, birthday parties, coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, and even funerals. Furthermore, from the Shia Muslims in the Middle East who flagellate themselves with blades to meditating Tibetan monks and Pentecostal serpent handlers in the US, rituals can be found all around the world (pp. 2–3). Whether private or public, secular or religious, rituals mark the crucial events in people’s lives (pp. 4–5).

Through the lenses of evolutionary approaches, the second chapter, *The Ritual Species*, depicts the ritualistic behaviour among various animal species and emphasizes the essential role rituals have played in human evolutionary history. Drawing on many examples from the animal world, from mating rituals of flamingos and mourning rituals of elephants to chimpanzees performing greeting rituals, Xygalatas points out their astonishing similarity with human rituals (pp. 18–25). Subsequently, on the example of burial rituals underlined by archaeological evidence, Xygalatas provides insight into the interconnectedness of ritual activities and the formation of human civilization (pp. 27–37). Consistent with Klaus Schmidt’s findings on the site of the temple Göbekli Tepe, and his proposition, Xygalatas presents an alternative explanation to other theories about the “Neolithic Revolution” that primarily focuses attention on agriculture as the cause of the settled, larger-scale and organized society. In contrast, it could be the other way around: people started to gather to build monumental temples for collective rituals, which put pressure on the larger-scale cooperation, and only then began settling and farming (pp. 32–37).

The third chapter, *Order*, focuses on one of the fundamental functions of ritual – coping with uncertainty and stress. Illustrated by the pioneering field research of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) and various other studies from places with a small amount of control, like casinos, sports events or war zones, Xygalatas repeatedly shows that these are precisely the rituals that provide people with a sense of control in their lives (pp. 50–66, 73–81) and even have effects on heart-rate variability and the levels of subjective anxiety (p. 81). The reason for that is closely connected to the characteristics of rituals – their rigidity, repetitiveness and redundancy (pp. 66–71). Consequently, people’s world becomes more structuralized and predictable (pp. 81–85).

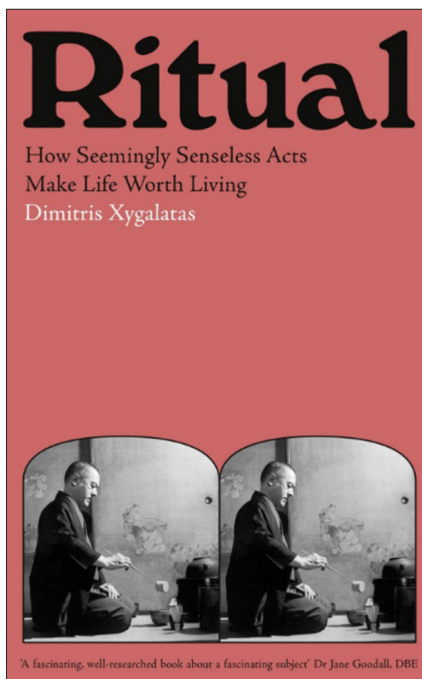
In the fourth chapter, *Glue*, another essential function of ritual is revealed: bringing people together and strengthening their bonds. Given the social function of ritual, the basic precondition

is to recognize with whom it is beneficial to interact and stick together. For this purpose, a strategy called *phenotypic matching* has been developed. Therefore, sharing the same traits and markers (e.g., dress code, language, scarification) or being engaged in the same type of behaviour (e.g., rituals) provides information about who belongs to the group (pp. 94–99). Additionally, social cohesion is strengthened by high-frequency (e.g., Sunday Mass), or high-intensity rituals (e.g., Thaipusam Kavadi) (pp. 110–117).

The fifth chapter, *Effervescence*, is named after Émile Durkheim's (1912/1915) term "collective effervescence", as Xygalatas explains, ... *the special feeling of exhilaration and togetherness experienced by those who take part in highly arousing collective rituals* (p. 119). The feeling can be experienced during football matches at the stadium, huge religious pilgrimages or land-diving ceremonies in Vanuatu. Or, during fire-walking in the Spanish village of San Pedro Manrique, where Xygalatas, Konvalinka, Roepstorff, and Bulbulia (2011) measured the heart rates of fire-walkers, their kith and kin and unrelated spectators. The results showed that the stronger their social ties were, the more their heart rates were matched. Hence, they were experiencing effervescence on the physiological level – both the fire-walkers and their close ones (pp. 123–136).

The sixth chapter, *Superglue*, dives more into the specifics of high-intensity rituals, also called extreme, and explains that social bonds are consolidated through the experience of shared suffering, thus enabling communities to more effectively cooperate, especially when facing existential threats (p. 174). Complemented by the findings from research conducted by Xygalatas et al. (2013) on Mauritius in the context of the Hindu pilgrimage Thaipusam Kavadi, it transpires that the participants who experienced more pain during this ritual also donated more money to charity. Interestingly, the same results were also found for their close ones, who accompanied them during the ritual. Consequently, the ritual does not have an effect only on the feeling of oneness with the group but also on the behaviour itself (pp. 167–173).

The seventh chapter, *Sacrifice*, further explores the dimension of the costliness of rituals. Indeed, the costs in terms of time, money, health and other expended resources can reliably convey the intention of the sender or their hidden qualities because such behaviour is hard to fake. For instance, this can be seen in the courtship rites for finding a suitable partner, requiring displaying physical and personality traits and even socioeconomic status (pp. 186–189). Moreover, sacrificing the personal benefits for collective goals may sometimes be necessary for the group's survival and thriving. Therefore, to avoid the exploitation by free-riders, groups can make their members pay in advance through harsh initiation rituals, by participation in other extreme rituals or by imposing strict norms to which their members must adhere (pp. 195–205). Nevertheless, signalling of belonging to the group works both ways – towards the other in-group members, but also to oneself, so creating and fortifying the commitment (p. 207).



From the healing rituals to witchcraft curses, the eighth chapter, *Well-being*, contains a detailed overview of the rituals and their effects on physical and mental health. Although rituals can be painful, exhausting and dangerous, paradoxically, they also provide positive expectations about the outcome and lead to changes, even at the level of neurotransmitters. Thus, positive expectations (healing) can lead to improving the condition, whereas negative expectations (curse) may worsen the condition; not only because of the expectation itself but also because the individual and the whole community start to behave according to those expectations, empowering the process. In addition, rituals, as a social bonding mechanism, help to create a network of relationships that serve as a safety net in times of need and therefore balance the state of well-being (pp. 228–235).

In the ninth and final chapter *Harnessing the Power of Ritual*, Xygalatas discusses the changing rituals as a result of new challenges that people nowadays face – be it the alternative forms that replaced the traditional rituals often abandoned due to the lockdown and forced social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating new ceremonies for important life events like divorce or the ways rituals are embedded even in our workplace (pp. 240–247, 250–252, 261–265). Xygalatas concludes that humans are ritual species, and rituals, even though they seem senseless, may, indeed, make life worth living (p. 268).

Xygalatas' new book is a thought-provoking piece, inspiring us to re-explore the world we live in and the facts we thought we knew. The book is written in understandable language and, hence, is accessible to the general public. Even though the author does not aim to present a comprehensive theoretical model of ritual, he succeeds in systematically examining the basic characteristics, mechanisms and functions of ritual. With the emphasis on research in the natural environment, the book delivers valuable insights into conducting research in various cultural contexts with its ups and downs. Connecting approaches and methodologies from various scientific disciplines, such as anthropology, psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary sciences, Xygalatas offers a synthesizing interdisciplinary framework for the study of rituals.

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