

Margo Kitts. *Elements of Ritual and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 113 pages. \$18.

A slim volume sweeping in scope, *Elements of Ritual and Violence* by Margo Kitts provides an overview of ritualized violence that draws on empirical cases from biblical texts to Islamic State beheading videos to theoretical perspectives spanning classical anthropological works to recent developments in cognitive science. With twenty pages dedicated to bibliography, the book is essentially a literature review. It is a succinct orientation to two subjects that are notoriously difficult to define and theorize—violence and ritual—and the complex relationship between them.

The first major section is centered on violence. It begins with the recognition that what constitutes violence “is in the eye of the beholder” (5). Kitts invites the reader to behold violence from three viewpoints. First, she examines popular perspectives on violence in art and media, which serve as an accessible starting point for the volume. Second, she presents philosophical and anthropological discourse on violence, with a focus on the roles of pain and violence in personal and social transformation and theories of the performance of religious violence. Third, through a study of ancient cultural practices Kitts considers whether there is a human disposition for or against violence, and determines that the evidence is inconclusive.

The second major section is centered on ritual, minimally defined as “organized behaviour which is less technical than symbolic in outcome” (38), and arguably an experience that “eludes discursive dissection altogether” (37). Kitts approaches ritual as it relates to violence through the interconnected categories of ideation and formalization.

Ideation includes “the emergence of ideas, images, and awareness, including sensory-affective awareness and a sense of personal transformation and social identity” (38). Following an outline of classical theoretical perspectives on the primacy, multivocality, and dynamism of ritual and the development and critique of linguistic paradigms, Kitts turns to two examples of violent, ideologically-motivated, political rituals: the 9/11 attacks and the self-immolation of Buddhist monks in Tibet. Both groups amplify their message through ritualization and may contribute to generating a “violent imaginary,” an inarticulate yet menacing understanding of the world.

Formalization includes “embodied behaviour,” and encompasses rhythm, kinesthetics, expressive register, and more (38). Kitts first considers ritual as communication, both in the form of speech acts and patterned visual and sensory performances. She discusses features of ritual communication that distinguish it from everyday communication, such as formality and fixity, and how these may serve a violent intent. What rituals communicate, however, is often semantically imprecise and thus there is grave potential for miscommunication. Kitts next considers the seductive quality of ritual through a comparison of ritual and music, both of which are anchored in somatic experience—rhythm, pain, pleasure, emotional arousal—and privilege the body as integrally connected to imagination. Ritual has the capacity to excite emotions and to express emotions through a range of ritual textures, yet at times ritual may have an emotional distancing effect. Genocidal killing and maiming during the conflict in Rwanda are taken as an example throughout. An extended excursus describing and critiquing cognitive theories of religious belief and ritualization as a way of coping with perceived threats concludes the discussion.

The final section of the book applies the analytical frameworks for violence and ritual to the case of rituals of menace—“cursing and threatening rituals” (84)—through the specific

examples of ancient Near Eastern oath-swearing rituals and the Islamic State staged beheadings of 2014.

*Elements of Ritual and Violence* is anchored in an anthropological approach to religious studies yet draws on insights from other disciplines and would be a valuable introduction for those engaging questions of ritualized violence from various fields. The primary audience is academic rather than pastoral practitioners, although it may serve as a point of access to conceptual tools to assist in the interpretation of sacred texts and the shaping of contemporary rituals.

This handbook-style volume is impressive in scope as a high-level overview of a vast array of theoretical frameworks connected to empirical examples from diverse global and historical contexts. In-depth engagement with specific theories or cases is unavoidably absent. As Kitts writes, “Curious readers will consult the forenamed sources, but following is a summary of the main points” (78). Despite the survey style, Kitts directly tackles challenging questions about how to interpret source material, including ancient texts and prehistoric art, and engages crucial issues in defining and accessing ritual experience. When embarking on a study of ritualized violence, *Elements of Ritual and Violence* is not the last book to reference, but it is an excellent place to begin.

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