

Kathryn T. McClymond. *Ritual Gone Wrong: What We Learn from Ritual Disruption*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 256 pages. \$35.

In *Ritual Gone Wrong*, Kathryn T. McClymond, chair and professor of religious studies at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia, seeks to “address the gap” in ritual studies between what “has been observed in ritual events and what has been imagined about the nature of ritual more broadly” (10). She focuses in particular upon “ritual disruptions” or ritual “mistakes.” For McClymond, “no single characteristic defines ritual” (3). With a nod to Jonathan Z. Smith’s culturally dexterous understanding of the term “religion,” McClymond takes a “polythetic” approach to her understanding of rituals. For her, rituals encompass a spectrum of routinized activities that include “normative participant roles, specified materials, prescribed times and locations, preferred gestures and language, and shared understandings of the short- and long-term results for individuals and communities” (4). Ritual results entail changes in communities and individuals with respect to religion and culture, and they occur with concern for social goals and expectations, both detailed and vague, like the common good. The notion of ritual results also entails ritual standards because communities have goals and idealized procedures in mind when they perform rituals.

Communities establish ritual standards, according to McClymond. When standards are not met or the ritually unexpected happens, a ritual disruption or mistake occurs; the ritual goes wrong. McClymond’s *Ritual Gone Wrong* examines five case studies of ritual disruption from differing historical, geographical, social, and material contexts. She analyzes: 1) the Vedic *śrautasūtras* (c. 1500–500 BCE), advice for priests to prepare and correct for ritual mistakes; 2) the tractate Zevachim in the Mishnah (~220 CE), curiously recording rabbis correcting obsolete ritual practices of priests; 3) the misrepresentation of blood libel, or Christian accusations of Jewish communities killing non-Jews (usually Christians) to acquire blood for use in ritual ceremony; 4) disruptions in opening and awards ceremonies of the Olympic games; and 5) the unaddressed national and international missteps in the trial and execution of Saddam Hussein in 2006.

McClymond notes that she could have magnified one or two events for a thick description but says that she opted instead for a sample to exhibit the thoughtfulness of her argument (12). She also defends her use of texts rather than ethnographic or anthropological study, stating that she wants to show how, in “virtually any source material,” ritual scholars can find ritual gone wrong. The selection of case studies may seem unconnected. Yet, just as rituals have no singular characteristic, ritual disruptions also manifest in multiplicity. In that regard, she does not present her case studies as comprehensive, but rather as illustrative of how ritual disruptions might occur in any number of ways.

For teachers and researchers of preaching and worship, McClymond’s introductory pages will probably be most helpful as resource material for developing an introductory lecture or supporting material for an essay or chapter that would benefit from discussion about the unpredictability of rituals and their susceptibility to the everyday stuff of life, like mistakes. Put another way, her argument in the introduction that we should pay attention to ritual error as a means of bridging what is ritually lived and imagined is clearest and most provocative. Yet each exemplary case study also includes intricate facts and explanations that offer wider ways of considering what ritual is and what it does with respect to religious pluralism, anti-Semitism, nationalism, sport, Islamophobia, and geopolitics, to name a few. One might also choose to isolate one case study for a class reading and develop an accompanying assignment, set of

questions, or in-class exercise for students to identify other instances of ritual gone wrong. Or, *Ritual Gone Wrong* might serve as a rich departure point for thinking about how to accommodate ritual mistakes and recalibration in praxis-based coursework for aspiring leaders of ritual practices.

When McClymond challenges Jonathan Z. Smith, her argument especially shines for scholars of ritual study. McClymond contests his idea that rituals portray what ought to be in contrast to how things are (60–61). She asserts instead that, by close reading of ancient texts like the Mishnah, communities not only made room for ritual disruption but also understood rituals to include disorientation and error as a connection to the elasticity and dynamism of ordinary life.

McClymond's work successfully blurs the division between lived and imagined ritual experiences by bringing into view the scholarly significance of ritual disruption. Her emphasis upon textual sources also highlights how even speculative interpretations of ritual subversion and disruption that are represented rather than performed will complement and extend ethnographic and anthropological descriptions of ritual practices.

Gerald C. Liu, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ