



Michael Bull and Jon Mitchell, eds., *Ritual, Performance and the Senses*

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THIS SATISFYING COLLECTION edited by Michael Bull and Jon Mitchell sets out to explore “the potential of combining cognitive/neuroanthropology, performance studies, and the anthropology of the senses to develop a new understanding of religious transmission” (1). And it achieves this admirably. The editor’s introduction lays theoretical groundwork and sketches out the contents.

Chapter 1, “Ontology, Mimesis and Divine Intervention: Understanding Catholic Visionaries” by Mitchell, is a case study of divine intervention in Malta. To paraphrase the introduction, in January 2006, Angelik Caruana noticed that a statue of the Virgin Mary recently purchased by his wife began to weep tears of blood. He began to receive messages from the Holy Mother and built a shrine to her. In his weekly prayer meetings, he received visions and messages, fought demons and the devil, and experienced the pain of Christ’s passion. The weekly sessions were published on YouTube. Caruana has a blog and has received wide media coverage. Mitchell does a wonderful job of describing the performer, his performances, and the broader cultural and social setting. His aim is “to understand not merely that this happens, but *how*: what are the processes that lead to visionary experiences of holy presence” (29).

In “Ritual Action Shapes Our Brains: An Essay in Neuroanthropology,” Robert Turner argues that rituals have “the function of physically changing the brains of the participants, or maintaining such changes that have already taken place” (31), changes that can now be measured using magnetic resonance imaging. He begins with a definition of ritual and suggests that ritual persists “because it is useful” (33) in some way. MRI studies of the brains of twins show the importance of heredity and the ways in which the brain changes with age and experience, including the catchy observation that “neurons that fire together, wire together”—that is, repeated experiences bring about permanent linkages in our brains. “Learning a skill by repetition is now known materially to change our brains” (36). The suggestion is that ritual stimulates neurotransmitters to produce rewards, which we experience as happiness. Is this why ritual persists—because it makes us feel good? This chapter demands careful re-reading. We are used to images of meditating monks wired up to have their brain functions monitored. What seems to be missing here are MRIs of folk performing rituals.

Greg Downey opens his chapter, “The Importance of Repetition: Ritual as a Support to Mind,” with a touching vignette of his elderly and increasingly infirm grandmother faithfully praying the Rosary, as she had done for many years. But why do people pray? This chapter employs a multi-pronged neuroanthropological approach to explore the role of “quiet, contemplative practice” such as silent prayer in religious practice. He argues that prayer functions as “a socially constituted technology of neurological self-manipulation, especially in times of stress, existential fear, or moral conflict” (47). In the section entitled “Prayer as Emotional Coping: A Neuroanthropological Perspective,” Downing cites research that suggests prayer releases extra dopamine and that this offers an explanation of prayer’s ability to soothe. In addition, he cites research that suggests prayer causes long-term changes in neural physiology, the ways in which our brains are wired. People who pray know that prayer makes them feel good, and this chapter goes some way to explain why.

The chapter on “Place-making in the ‘Holy of Holies’: The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem” by Trevor H. J. Marchand, is the result of a twelve-day observation of the supposed site of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and burial. It is based on observations and interviews with pilgrims, priests who officiate at the site, and the traditional Muslim caretakers. The author argues that “place-making,” an individual’s sense of place, is “grounded in the integral weave between mind, body, and environment” (63), but it is also shaped by emotional states. The surprising point made in this chapter is that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is so crowded, so chaotic, and so contested that it seems impossible to get any real sense of the sanctity of the place. The senses are so heavily bombarded that it is impossible to achieve the “emotional state” in which one can experience the site’s sanctity. Because this is the case, the author argues that spiritual connection with the site is only achieved once the pilgrims are safely home again. There they can relive their visit through photos, souvenirs, relics, and other memorabilia. This is an interesting suggestion, but the author could have offered more evidence in its support. That said, the chapter is worthwhile for its colorful thick description of a dysfunctional pilgrimage site.

On the banks of the Ganges River outside Benares in Northern India, a month-long performance of the story of Ram, the Ramlila, is held. This is the subject of “The Spaces and Places of Ramnagar Ramlila” by Richard Schechner. For the faithful who attend, the actors “become” the deities they act out, and the various site to which the

performance shifts each day “becomes” a sacred pilgrimage site. This is much more than a performance, a play, or a show; it is a sacred ritual of great significance to actors and audiences alike. Schechner, the guru of performance studies, gives a long (36 page) scene-by-scene description of the event. I was surprised that there was not more performance theory at work here. It is certainly one of the best descriptions of the event that I have read, but it seemed to lack the analysis and theoretical perspective one might expect from Schechner.

In “‘Inner Movement’ between Practices of Meditation, Martial Arts, and Acting,” Phillip B. Zarrilli takes a phenomenological approach to exploring the conscious states experienced in three “embodied practices”: meditation, martial arts, and acting. It includes four case studies written in the first person, recounting various conscious states experienced in a range of exercises. This is not an easy chapter. It is likely that the current reviewer lacks the background knowledge to derive full benefit from it.

In “Exploring the Andean Sensory Model: Knowledge, Memory, and the Experience of Pilgrimage,” Zoila Mendoza argues that different societies organize the senses differently, and that we need to understand a society through its “sensory model” in order to understand its practices. The chapter is a case study of a pilgrimage in the Peruvian Andes dedicated to the Señor de Qoyllorit’i (Lord of the Shiny Snow). Once a year, 40,000 to 50,000 pilgrims travel high in the mountains to view a picture of the Christ painted on a rock. This has been a sacred site since pre-Hispanic times. The chapter focuses on dance troupes who walk for three days and two nights for 85 miles to the continual accompaniment of flutes and drums, sustaining themselves by chewing coca leaves. The author argues that it is the unity of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic experience that makes pilgrimage valid and authentic. This is a lively and interesting chapter. Much of it is concerned with popular dance forms known as Chakiri Wayri and Wayri Ch’unchu—the reader is advised to view these performances on YouTube.

Contemporary psychology holds that perception “begins at the edge of the central nervous system (CNS) and is conditioned by the properties of the receptor organs” (153), that is to say, perception is a physical and chemical process. In his chapter, “Sensation and Transmission,” David Howes argues convincingly for an “extended sensorium,” a world in which our senses and perception are conditioned by specific cultural practices. He illustrates this with four sense-intensive case studies of religious experience: a cacophonous festival among the Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea, the worship of a Byzantine icon experienced through vision, the silence of a Quaker meeting, and the feeling of “Divine Touch” in Pentecostal traditions in Ghana.

In conclusion, this collection will be of interest to scholars engaged in the performative and phenomenological aspects of religious studies. It has an excellent bibliography and a good index. One minor irritation is that the notes for each chapter are gathered at the end of the volume.

At the outset, this volume suggests criteria by which it might be evaluated: “As an experiment in anthropological theory, it might be judged not according to the definitive answers it provides, but rather by the questions asked and avenues opened by combining cognitive, performative, and sensory studies of ritual” (10). In this it has certainly succeeded.

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