



A Review of Dimitris Xygalatas' *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*

Dimitris Xygalatas, 2022, 320 pp., New York: Little, Brown Spark. ISBN-13: 978-0316462402

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Published online: 4 May 2023

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“Ritual pre-dates every single one of the hallmarks of civilisation, including farming, writing, pottery and the wheel.” – Dimitris Xygalatas

Xygalatas has been a pioneer in combining laboratory and field methods to study collective rituals. *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*, is a successful attempt by Xygalatas to separate rituals as a distinctive area from the general body of religion.

Xygalatas discusses the role of rituals in human civilization and argues that rituals are deeply ingrained in human nature. He suggests that ritual and intelligence evolved side by side, with the most intelligent animals having the richest repertoire of rituals. Rituals allow organisms to deal with challenges that come with having a complex psychology; for example, courting dances in birds aid in pair-bonding, mourning rituals of elephants help with coping with anxiety, and various rituals in chimpanzees aid in cooperation and social organization.

Xygalatas argues that rituals are a natural response to anxiety and stress, evolved as a coping mechanism in humans and other animals, providing a sense of control in uncertain situations and can be effective in reducing stress. Despite similarities across cultures and domains, such as gambling, sports, religion, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, rituals may seem irrational to outsiders, but they are a cognitive gadget that helps humans cope with stress. Collective rituals build affiliation among humans through the use of symbolic markers of group membership and alignment of behaviors, generating feelings of unity and securing strong and lasting

bonds. However, the book acknowledges the potential for collective rituals to foster division and hatred.

Xygalatas also highlights the use of costly signals in human society, particularly in the domain of ritual. Public ceremonies often involve substantial costs in terms of time and energy investments, but these costly rituals can help solve a number of problems related to social living, such as signaling desirable traits as a mate and commitment as a cooperative group member. Finally, he argues how, through the emergence of new rituals during the coronavirus pandemic, workplaces built team cohesion and increased productivity, coping with global anxiety.

Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living is an engaging, well-written book that explores the significance of rituals in human societies. Xygalatas objectively presents his research findings and draws from a variety of colorful and captivating examples, including his childhood experiences and field research in Mauritius and Spain. Unlike many books, this one maintains a consistently high level of engagement throughout. Xygalatas poses an intriguing research question and provides insightful answers regarding the purpose and evolution of rituals. This book is recommended for students and researchers in psychological, anthropological, and cognitive science of religion fields. It is a fascinating read that will remain relevant in its field for years to come.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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