

REVIEW ARTICLE

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SECULAR RITUAL

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Jeltje Gordon-Lennox (ed.), *Emerging ritual in secular societies: a transdisciplinary conversation*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, *Crafting secular ritual*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016.

As a subject of anthropological concern, ritual emerged from the study of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bell 1997, Warburg 2016). It was not until 1977, when Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff published their seminal edited volume, that anthropologists directly engaged with the idea of ‘secular’ ritual, and their book set the agenda for further anthropological inquiry. In particular, Moore and Myerhoff questioned whether theories of ritual, originally devised to explain religious or spiritual ceremonies, could be useful in understanding secular ritual. They asserted that, because of its association with religion, ritual has too often been approached as a subcategory of religion instead of as a category of social action in and of itself. Yet, they argue that secular ritual can be just as significant to social life as religious ritual undoubtedly is and that as a category it deserves consideration. The momentum generated by their volume garnered some attention from anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s, though, after the initial surge of interest, secular ritual has received comparatively very little attention in the anthropological literature since.

One explanation for the seeming paucity of work on distinctly secular ritual is the fact that scholars have found it difficult, if not impossible, to locate any theoretical differences in anthropological approaches to ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ rituals respectively (Warburg 2016, Asad 2003). Yet at the same time, ethnographic studies of religious rituals overwhelmingly outnumber those of rituals deemed secular or non-religious, and the question remains whether or not ritual should be approached as a ‘neutral’ social action that cannot be placed into either a ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ category, only being interpreted as religious or secular by participants, and whether there is any value in distinguishing between the two. More recently,

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anthropologists have employed the term ‘secular ritual’ to discuss state practices and political events. Yael Navaro-Yashin, who relies on the term in order to discuss state-sponsored rituals in Turkey, writes that its purpose ‘was to employ the anthropological tools for the study of “ritual” in studies of modern secular politics’ (2002: 188), thus proposing a place for secular ritual in contemporary anthropological discourse.

Even though, as Joanna Wojtkowiak points out in her contribution to *Emerging ritual in secular societies*, ‘the labels, “religious,” “spiritual” or “secular” are complex and not mutually exclusive’ (160), the perception that ritual is closely associated with religion ultimately necessitated the editor of the compilation, Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, marking out a distinct category of secular ritual. Furthermore, in both volumes Gordon-Lennox argues that the term ‘secular’ has often been approached as the opposite of ‘religion’, yet, following Talal Asad (2003) and Mary Douglas (in Bell 1997), she also maintains that, while the secular does not oppose the sacred, for her purposes it is a better term for addressing the complexities of new and changing ritual practices that are not aligned with any single religious tradition.

Thus, for most of the authors reviewed here, ‘secular ritual’ refers primarily to those rituals that are conducted with an explicit moderation of religion, the combination of one or more religions, or the lack of any religious institutional authority. In this vein ‘secular’ does not refer to the absence of religion, but rather to the focus on a combination of personalized symbols, language and gestures that add to the ceremony’s emotional effects and its significance to the participants. A ‘secular’ ritual could include several religious traditions, such as the multi-cultural weddings discussed by Andrés Allemand Smaller in Chapter 6. However, it could also include no mention of ritual at all. In Chapter 10, Joanna Wojtkowiak discusses some individuals who were not permitted to participate in rituals by religious institutions, such as gays and lesbians, and who developed alternative ceremonies for themselves from the 1980s and 1990s which were explicitly distanced from established religious traditions.

Though the two books reviewed here essentially do not engage with the current anthropological debates regarding the value of the term ‘secular’ or the problems involved in defining a ‘secular society’ (see Starrett 2010), these contributions offer new and emerging perspectives and fresh approaches to the study of ritual. The first, *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies*, is a compilation of contributions from psychologists, psychoanalysts, neurologists, anthropologists, professional officiants who create and perform rituals, artists and journalists.

The second is a concise guide to creating and experiencing secular rituals for individuals and communities.

The contributors to *Emerging ritual in secular societies* continue the momentum towards a renewed interest in thinking about secular ritual as a subject of serious academic concern. The volume features fifteen concise chapters, each offering a different perspective on secular ritual. The book is divided into four parts. Part one is focused on the origins and universal aspects of ritual, conceived fairly broadly. The contributors in Part two concentrate on the healing and transformative potential of ritual and the impact it can have on both individuals and communities. The authors in Part three discuss and reflect on private and intimate rituals, while in Part four they explore rituals undertaken in public places.

Ellen Dissanayake, a scholar who adopts an evolutionary and biological perspective on art and ritual, opens the volume with her contribution, 'The art of ritual and the ritual of art'. She suggests that art largely resembles 'ritual' in the sense that it necessarily involves the 'making special' of various ordinary materials and experiences. Ritual, in this sense, 'is characterized not only by repeatability or conventionality but by unusual behavior that sets it off from the ordinary or everyday' (29). She considers the universality of ritual and goes so far as to argue that ritual is an inherent biological human need.

Matthieu Smyth, an anthropologist, approaches ritual from a functionalist perspective in Chapter 2 in his 'Human rituals and ethology: a scholar's journey'. He argues that rites have a stabilizing role in society, since they have the effect of regulating emotions and thus contribute to social cohesion (43). Like Dissanayake in Chapter 1, Smyth argues that ritual can be approached as having a biological function. In this vein, he asserts that the debate regarding the distinction between religious and secular ritual is moot, since it is a universal and inherent aspect of the human experience, a 'timeless' human activity, and cannot be defined as either secular or religious.

Robert Scaer, a neurologist and psychologist, focuses on the effects of ritual on trauma in his contribution, 'The neurophysiology of ritual and trauma: cultural implications'. While ritual can have many purposes, he explores its ability to induce a state of physical and psychological healing, specifically, ritual that involves somatic techniques. He further argues that the communal nature of ritual has therapeutic effects which promote healing and can allow individuals to attain a sense of empowerment.

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, a psychoanalyst and the editor of the volume, opens Part two with her own contributions in Chapters 4 and 5. In the former, 'The rhyme and reason of ritualmaking', she discusses how rituals enable individuals to make sense of their social

worlds, as well as their potential to enhance social bonds, particularly since ‘globalization and individualization, the “free market” and relentless competition have destroyed our sense of belonging to civilized, supportive groups’ (72).

Like Scaer in Chapter 3, she considers whether ritual, as a universal social action, can be defined as either religious or necessarily secular. Rather, she argues that scholars should approach ritual as a ‘culturally strategic way of acting in the world’ (72), a concept proposed by Bell (2009). On the other hand, she writes that rituals that are not done properly or are inadequate cause damage and can produce alienation and withdrawal from social life. In Chapter 5, ‘Case study: a Nordic rite of passage comes of age’, written in collaboration with Lene Mürer, Marie Louise Peterson and Bjarni Jonsson, she considers Nordic coming-of-age ceremonies (or confirmations) and asks why young people in Nordic countries are increasingly choosing secular (or humanist) ceremonies over religious ones.

In Chapter 6, ‘Multicultural wedding ceremonies’, journalist Andrés Allemand Smaller discusses the difficulties in trying to plan multi-cultural wedding ceremonies. Reflecting Smyth’s sentiment, Smaller argues that wedding ceremonies do not have to fit into either a ‘secular’ or a ‘religious’ category, but rather that ‘secular’ weddings can combine a unique mixture of traditions that renders them meaningful to the participants. He finishes his discussion of multicultural weddings with ten guidelines for creating a successful marriage celebration.

Christine Behrend, a wedding and funeral officiant, offers a detailed and intimate look at a funeral she planned for a violinist in Chapter 7, ‘Case study: a funeral ceremony for a violinist’. First she discusses how objects can be powerful additions to funeral ceremonies and can relate more about the individual’s life than words or actions can. She makes a distinction between the physical object as an extension of the individual and the immaterial sensorial effects, like music. Behrend then describes the funeral devised for the violinist, showing how the sensorial and physical aspects of the ceremony allowed a profound ritual, which, although without any overt religious references, was particularly evocative for the violinist’s friends and family.

In Chapter 8, ‘Case study: a memorial and a wedding rolled into one humanist ceremony’, Isabel Russo, the Head of Ceremonies of the British Humanist Association (BHA), addresses the growing number of officiants who are trained by the BHA to lead and plan non-religious ceremonies in Europe. Humanist ceremonies began in the late nineteenth century in England and have been becoming more popular, and more standardized, particularly since the 1980s. Russo discusses some of the challenges involved in staging

secular rituals and describes an unusual request from a BHA member who wanted to combine a wedding and a funeral. Finally, she emphasizes the healing aspects of humanist ceremonies for non-religious people, showing how ritual may enable individuals to articulate their complex experiences, which they might not otherwise be able to accomplish in a religious ceremony.

Part three opens with Michael Picucci's contribution, 'Ritual as resource: health and transformation in the twenty-first century', in which he argues that ritual should not be seen as entirely associated with religion or military procedures, but rather as a resource for healing and transformation. Picucci, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, calls ritual a 'human technology' (140) and asserts that, by becoming fluent in the use of this technology, individuals and communities can access a powerful therapeutic tool for reconciliation and social cohesion. He defines ritual as much more than simply physical actions, emphasizing that it requires a level of conscious involvement that includes intention and visualization. In fact, he writes that a ritual may not involve any physical action at all and that individuals can learn to use ritual as a resource for private development, similar to meditative exercises.

In Chapter 10, 'Sensing the dead: the role of embodiment, the senses and material objects in the ritualization of mourning', Joanna Wojtkowiak, a cultural psychologist, considers how 'post-secular' and increasingly pluralistic societies in the West experience grief and how new theories of grieving emphasize the significance of maintaining a symbolic relationship with the deceased instead of 'moving on' (158). She also reflects on the material dimension of mourning, describing how mourning the dead may involve the deceased's possessions, including their remains. Finally, she considers the sensorial dimensions of mourning, arguing that comprehending the embodied experience as a critical aspect of ritual is crucial to understanding its impact on emotion and social life.

Lindy Mechefske, a freelance writer, reflects on how rituals play a significant role in how individuals experience food in Chapter 11 in her 'Ritual and food'. Given the centrality of food to our existence, it is hardly surprising that sharing food with others or even eating alone has given rise to rituals in almost every culture that are focused entirely on the preparation, consumption and disposal of food. She considers both religious and secular rituals that are centered on food, as well as some of the new rituals surrounding food in the West, such as the common practice of photographing food and posting it on social media sites before eating it. She also takes a look at how synthetic foods might change the way eating is ritualized.

Irene Stengs, a cultural anthropologist, opens Part four with her 'Commemorative ritual and the power of place' on the growing interest in commemorating violent deaths, with a

focus on European responses. She explores how some violent deaths are experienced as public events and how public memorials are increasingly sought to commemorate individuals who died in car accidents, train wrecks or bombings. She conducted an ethnographic study of Dutch public mourning rituals, emphasizing the importance of place in the 'new public mourning' culture (188), as well as the difficulties involved in creating a space where both the public and the victim's friends and families can mourn.

Gianpiero Vincenzo, a sociologist, considers the emergence of a consumer society in Chapter 13, showing how consumerist life-styles are giving rise to new rituals based on consumption in his contribution, 'New ritual society: consumerist revolution and the rediscovery of ritual'. He argues that shopping malls and supermarkets are replacing religious spaces as places where public rituals have typically been enacted and experienced. In this vein, his concise argument is aimed at understanding symbolic consumption in public places and how such studies can contribute to more responsible and conscientious human development.

In Chapter 14, "Ritual and contemporary art", Jacqueline Millner, a scholar who focuses on art and public spaces, argues that a significant site of secular ritual is contemporary art. Artists who create contemporary pieces create a public space that is meant to engage and transform individuals, and they use the same 'materials', so to speak, as ritual-making. That is, contemporary art projects involve 'people, participation, and place', the three primary elements of ritual (217). Millner asserts that art can have profound transformative and healing effects on individuals and communities, and she reflects on how several contemporary artists actively attempt to use ritual methods to and seize and transform a space in order to transform individuals through ritualistic experiences.

In the final chapter, 'Interview with ritual artist Ida van der Lee', Christine Behrend, a secular ceremonial celebrant, discusses her interview with Dutch ritual artist Ida van der Lee, who creates rituals in public spaces which emphasize commemorating or bringing into focus events or people who have been forgotten. Lee designs rituals for organizations, companies, communities and individuals, and has created ceremonies for demolition projects, treating spaces and old buildings as if they were meaningful members of the community. As she discusses some of the completed rituals she has worked on and her current projects, she laments how rituals have lost their salience in an increasingly secular society, believing that art in particular has significant latent potential to bring ritual back to the forefront of public life.

While each chapter is both engaging and relevant to anthropological interest in ritual, the contributors tend to focus only on ritual as an entirely positive, consensual experience and, with the exception of Smyth's chapter, do not include any discussion of rituals that might not result in cohesion and fulfillment. Smyth, however, only points to non-Western 'bad' rituals that cause harm (according to Western societies), arguing that 'good' ritual is a latent force that could be used to bind societies together in positive social cohesion (51). In other words, the authors collectively maintain that 'social cohesion' is the purpose, or *correct* purpose, of ritual. The overemphasis on 'social cohesion' and 'social control' necessarily evokes Marilyn Strathern's work, *Discovering social control* (1985), in which she cautions anthropologists to consider their assumptions concerning social norms of order and disorder.

Further, while these works broadly share a similar subject of academic concern, they are narrow in the sense that they focus on a few specific affluent Western communities (all of the case studies were based on ethnographic studies conducted in Norway, Switzerland, Denmark or the Netherlands). In this respect the title is slightly misleading, and this is one of the pitfalls of the book. The compilation is not concerned with 'emerging ritual in secular societies' but rather with emerging secular ritual in northern European communities.

Finally, the chapters are almost too concise, and many of the contributors are not able to develop their points fully. In particular, some concepts are not fully expanded or defined, such as 'post-secular societies' (158) or 'human technology' (140). Although slightly superficial, *Emerging ritual in secular societies* is nonetheless an excellent introduction to recent thought on secular ritual throughout the social and medical sciences.

In her complementary volume, *Crafting secular ritual* (2017), Gordon-Lennox builds on her previous work on creating secular ritual for marriages (2008) and funerals (2011) and expands on the the creative process of ritual-making. She offers a practical guide for individuals who wish to craft their own secular rituals, with helpful checklists and guidelines included in every chapter.

The book is divided into three parts aimed at 'making sense of ritual and making ritual that makes sense' (31). In the first two chapters, Gordon-Lennox provides a succinct introduction to the emerging field of ritology (27) and the purpose and meaning of ritual as a specific type of social action. She borrows Dissanayake's term (2017) to describe ritual as the act of 'making special' certain things, places or persons as a way to articulate communal or individual concerns (24). Ritual can also be approached as a culturally distinct way of addressing crucial emotional, spiritual and social experiences with language, physical action and symbols that are not typically employed in the same way during everyday life. Gordon-

Lennox approaches ritual as a basic human need, even a 'biologically endowed need' (23). She describes the many positive affects of ritual, from its therapeutic effects, its potential to encourage social cohesion and increased social engagement, the potential to ease transitions and feel safe, and finally the potential humanizing effects of rituals.

Gordon-Lennox argues that the primary reason people tend to be dissatisfied with institutional ceremonies is because they feel alienated by strange symbols or language and are deprived of the benefits of an authentic ritual. Thus, she argues that individuals and communities can plan and carry out ceremonies on their own in order to access the social and personal benefits of ritual. The second section includes guidelines for crafting authentic rituals and advice on using materials, music and objects in rituals.

She describes the basic concepts and planning of rituals in Chapters 3 and 4. Her six rules for designing rituals form the acronym 'CRAFT': create, respect, aesthetics, form and truth. She asserts that what sets contemporary ritual-making apart from previously established rituals is the creation of meaning and interpretation by the participants themselves, whereas established rituals have set meanings. The creative process involves the planning phase (Chapter 5), the creating phase (Chapter 6) and the realizing phase (Chapter 7). Chapter 5 includes a questionnaire in order to help readers determine their 'ritual identity', that is, the traditions, symbols and sounds that are most familiar and meaningful. Primarily, the exercise helps the reader to understand where they sit on the secular/religious spectrum, from having an institutional affiliation with an established religion, to being humanist, to being unaffiliated, to traditional or cultural beliefs that do not fall into the category of 'religion'. She includes a key to the questionnaire on p. 90. In Chapter 6, she walks the reader through the creating phase, including the importance of listing core values, mapping out the ceremony, selecting the right music or sounds, selecting the right format for the ceremony and thinking about meaningful gestures to include. In Chapter 7, the realizing phase, she includes a guide to the day of the ceremony from start to finish.

The third and final section offers guidelines and suggestions for creating specific rituals, including birth (Chapter 6), coming of age (Chapter 7), marriage (Chapter 8), growing old (Chapter 9), death and mourning (Chapter 10) and finally ritualizing in public spaces (Chapter 11), including graduation ceremonies and public protests. In sum, Gordon-Lennox created the guide in order to help individuals find ways to "make the ordinary *extra-ordinary*" (163, author's emphasis). The guide is clearly laid out, with several visual aids throughout to help the reader follow the concepts Gordon-Lennox employs to discuss ritual and the processes involved in planning one. Though its pitfalls are similar to those in *Emerging ritual*

in secular societies, namely that some terms and ideas are not fully discussed, such as her term ‘ultra-modern’ society (163), this work provides a succinct introduction to the basic concepts of ritual and offers ideas and tips as to how the reader can craft one for themselves. It is relevant to anyone interested in either experiencing or studying ritual-making.

In the last five years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the idea of distinctively secular ritual from scholars working in the social sciences (see Ayot 2015; Missonnier 2014; Rohmaniyah and Woodward 2012; Baldacchino 2014). *Crafting secular ritual* and *Emerging ritual in secular societies* contribute to the growing compendium of studies which seek to address ritual that cannot be classified as religious. While the debate on whether or not the term ‘secular’ is useful at all in academic discourse is ongoing, it is clear that the relationship between individuals and religious institutions, like that between individuals and the nation state, has undergone substantial changes over the past several decades in all regions of the world and that the term ‘secular’ has become a useful idiom in thinking and writing about these changes. Though not without their problems, these two books have laid the groundwork for further explorations of secular ritual as a topic that may be worthy of serious consideration by anthropologists.

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