



MARS HILL AUDIO

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Many of the books we reference are available from our friends at Eighth Day Books: www.eighthdaybooks.com or 1.800.841.2541.

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The meaning of ritual

Dru Johnson's *Human Rites: The Power of Rituals, Habits, and Sacraments* (2019) is published by Eerdmans. During our conversation, Johnson cited Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 1992, reissued 2009). In Bell's 1997 book *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press), she observed that "talk about ritual may reveal more about the speakers than about the bespoken." Her humility concerning the limits of her academic discipline is further demonstrated when she warns those involved in the discipline of "ritual studies" that "the emergence and subsequent understandings of the category of ritual have been fundamental to the modernist enterprise of establishing objective, universal knowledge, that, as the flip side of its explanative power, nostalgically rues the loss of enchantment." She also cites in the epigraph to her book the ancient Confucian sage Xunzi, who warned that "elaborate theories constructed by means of labyrinthine methodological considerations will only lead one away from reality."

Mary Douglas, in *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (Routledge, 1996) observes: "Those who despise ritual, even at its most magical, are cherishing in the name of reason a very irrational concept of communication." Later, she writes: "The confirmed anti-ritualist mistrusts external expression. He values a man's inner convictions. Spontaneous speech that flows straight from the heart, unpremeditated, irregular in form, even somewhat incoherent, is good because it bears witness to the speaker's real intentions. Either he is not a man who uses speech as a façade to conceal his thought, or on this occasion there was no time for polishing it up. Incoherence is taken for a sign of authenticity. . . . At the same time the anti-ritualist suspects speech that comes in standard units, polished with constant use; this is the hard coin of social intercourse, not to be trusted as expressing the speaker's true mind." She concludes: "In rejecting ritual forms of speech it is the 'external' aspect which is disvalued."

Among the works that Dru Johnson commends for further reading are Alexander Schmemmann's *The Liturgy of Death* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017); Tish Harrison Warren's *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2016); and Adam Alter's *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (Penguin Books, 2018).

In "Cult and Culture" (*First Things*, January 1993), Peter J. Leithart acknowledges that "Protestants have always had [difficulties] with ritual." He argues that ritual should be seen not as *magic* but as *language*. He cites William Willimon's *Peculiar Speech*, which "challenges the Enlightenment notions of universal reason and universal language. Language and meaning are culture-specific. Language and culture are virtually two sides of the same coin; to cross a cultural barrier is to cross a language barrier, and vice versa. This is true even when the official language is the same on both sides of the barrier." Thus, Willimon argues, "Christianity can be described as a culture, a set of practices, beliefs, a distinctive language." Leithart argues further that "worship can also be seen as the cultivation of a distinctively Christian culture, that is, a distinctively Christian way of naming the world. Worship is language class, where the Church is trained to speak Christian."

more on

Other books mentioned

Dallas Willard's *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge* (2018) is published by Routledge. Reinhard Hüter's *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (2019) is published by the Catholic University of America Press, as is Matthew Levering's *The Achievement of* (2019). David Lyle Jeffrey's *Scripture and the English Poetic Tradition* (2019) is published by Baker Academic. Christopher Phillips's *The Hymnal: A Reading History* (2018) is published by the Johns Hopkins University Press.

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