Play, Pain and Religion: Creating Gestalt through Kink Encounter  
By A. Robertson (2021)  
Bristol: Equinox, ix + 213pp., 15 figures  
Reviewed by Cody Musselman

Whips, canes, violet wands, ropes, paddles, spank benches, and collars are all pieces of equipment that people who play with the boundaries of pleasure and pain, submission and domination might use. They are also tools for world-making, Alison Robertson argues in Play, Pain and Religion: Creating Gestalt through Kink Encounter. Over the course of ten chapters, Robertson makes the case for understanding kink experiences as a form of ‘religioning’ – meaning a process or activity that adds meaning and value to one’s life.

Play, Pain and Religion follows recent trends in religious studies scholarship by locating religion outside of traditional religious traditions and institutions. Here, Robertson adopts an expansive definition of religion that does not hinge on belief, divinity, or a sense of the sacred. Instead, she focuses on action, and suggests that religion can best be described as a lived and evolving process, or as a verb; hence, ‘religioning.’ To account for how religion can function outside of belief and without reference to the sacred, Robertson borrows a term from German psychology: Gestalt. As a theory of mind, Gestalt psychology focuses on patterns over individual components, and is often explained as the whole being more than the sum of its parts. Robertson uses Gestalt to explain how something like kink can exceed the sum of its parts to create a sense of something more, or ‘an emergent sense of something else’ (p. 5).

With the help of Gestalt, Robertson positions kink and BDSM (bondage, discipline, submission, and masochism) practices as religioning, because
they generate meaningful feelings and a sense of specialness that cannot be conveyed through mere description. Simply explaining how the dominant partner whips the subordinate partner until they bruise, or how the ‘top’ cuts the ‘bottom’ to instill fear and then plays with their blood, for example, does not adequately capture the world-affirming trust that the bottom displays for the top who wields the knife, or the self-satisfaction and bliss the subordinate partner feels as they withstand more whips than anticipated, push past the pain, and enter into a trance-like state. The appeal, the pleasure, and the personal significance of these practices exceeds language, Robertson explains, yet are evident in the way that BDSM practitioners shape their identities, relationships, and lives around the transcendent feelings available through the kink scene. For Robertson, the ineffable yet world-defining qualities of kink and BDSM are what make these subcultures worthwhile topics for analysis within the frame of religion.

Much of the book focuses on the terms, aesthetics, roles, tools, activities, and relationships typical to kink culture, while arguing that they are all component parts in creating a BDSM Gestalt. BDSM, as Robertson explains, is ‘a collection of activities that involve the consensual and conscious use of pain, perceptions about pain, sensation, emotion, restraint, power, perceptions about power or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional and/or sensory pleasure’ (p. 22). She is careful to note that BDSM is not inherently sexual, and is not always done for purposes of sexual gratification. Rather, BDSM activities such as bondage and discipline, electric shocks or flogging can facilitate an intimate interpersonal bond, dissolve the subjective self, create spaces of alternative reality wherein the norms of everyday life are overturned or dismissed, or enable peak experiences known as ‘spacing.’ The outcome is different for everyone, Robertson explains, yet whatever sensation or state of consciousness the individual is seeking, it occurs within a period of play in which actors co-create an immersive ‘scene’ where exchanges of power, force, and energy take place. Robertson breaks down what it takes to set a ‘scene’ and to play within it in Chapters 2–5.

While the scene makes certain interpersonal experiences possible, Chapters 6–8 detail how the body is the true site of exchange. Through kinky dress such as corsets and collars, and bodily modifications such as cuts, scars, and bruising, the flesh bears witness to the acts of submission and domination taking place. Having interviewed over 40 people from the United Kingdom and the United States who participate in kink scenes, Robertson includes compelling first-person accounts of how kink practitioners use BDSM activities to ‘explore the edge’ between life and death, sanity and insanity, control and abandon, and consciousness and unconsciousness (p.
Through the words and experiences of her interview subjects, Robertson shows how a life-affirming thrill and new perspectives about the self and other can arise from transgressing social and physical limits. *Play, Pain and Religion* offers a helpful introduction to the basics of kink, and the strength of this book undoubtedly lies in the evocative quotes Robertson includes from her interlocutors. Yet Robertson’s snowball method of finding subjects through kink practitioner acquaintances and an online fetish network makes the study feel ungrounded and diffuse. As such, there are frequent tensions in Robertson’s observations and conclusions, in which generalizations about kink are often undercut by her efforts to account for the great variety of practices, motivations, sensations, and dynamics within the wider world of BDSM. Further, because the study is not based in a particular fetish club, play scene, demographic, or geography, it lacks an analysis of the surrounding cultural norms that cast BDSM practices as deviant. While Robertson frequently notes that BDSM practitioners are transgressing hegemonic sexual and social norms, there is no sustained attention given to what those norms are, where they come from, or how they are enforced. How have Protestant Christian ideas about morality, the body, and sexual citizenship shaped legal, cultural, and personal assumptions about what counts as normal and good in the United States and the United Kingdom, for example? Here, a greater engagement with literature on queer theory, religion and sexuality, or the history of sexuality and the state would have been useful for contextualizing the stakes of BDSM.

While Robertson states that her interest lies in showing how BDSM can produce feelings of religion – or a Gestalt – she is careful to note that she is not claiming BDSM is religion. This distinction is blurred at times, such as in Chapter 9, in which she discusses kink as ritual. Still, Robertson’s desire to show how kink can operate in religious ways might be strengthened by thinking alongside examples drawn from religious history. What religions have incorporated bodily modification, self-mortification, or other sadist practices into their efforts to access the divine? How might we understand the religious significance of contemporary BDSM activities in light of Catholic, Buddhist, and Hindu trials with pain, meditations upon death, and experiments with sexual gratification? Pulling the wealth of BDSM-adjacent practices that exist within religion into this study would help to underscore Robertson’s point that significant, meaningful, and even spiritual states of consciousness can arise through kink; and that kink should, indeed, be studied through a framework of religion.