Review

Risto Uro, *Ritual and Christian Beginnings: A Socio-Cognitive Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). 230 pp. £55 (hbk). ISBN: 978-0-19966-117-6.

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How did Christianity flourish, develop, and succeed? This is the question around which Risto Uro's book *Ritual and Christian Beginnings* revolves. The answer supplied by the author draws attention to something so evident that it is difficult to understand how it could have been overlooked by previous scholarship, i.e. the role of ritual in the diffusion of the first groups of the believers in Christ. The key assumption of Uro's analysis is that the success of a religion depends on ritual innovations. In this context, rituals, or processes of "ritualization", emerge as something that allows people to become engaged in institutionalized practices. This, in turn, consolidates the ideology and the moral values of the social group, while also functioning as an instrument for remembering and transmitting the core beliefs of a religious system.

In chapters 1 and 2, Uro presents and elaborates on three keys properties of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR henceforth) that constitute the backbone of the volume. CSR, according to Uro's recap:

1. Is explanation-driven
2. Relies on testable theories
3. Promotes a multilevel analysis of religious practices

In the subsequent chapters of the book, Uro distinguishes three perspectives on ritual:

1. Ritual as *action*
2. Ritual and *cooperation*
3. Ritual and religious *knowledge*

The first is the perspective that embraces McCauley and Lawson's definition of religious ritual as actions (see Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002). The second perspective is in line with Durkheim's (1912) central tenet, i.e. that religious rituals communicate about the social structure and create a basis for all communal life. The third aspect highlights that the attribution of meaning is a response to ritual, not an inherent quality of ritual itself.

Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate ritual as action, focusing on most of the practices that played a central role in the earliest phases of proto-Christian groups (i.e. ritual immersion performed by John the Baptist, Jesus' healing practices, and ritual healing in early Christianity). In all these ritualized practices, we observe agents acting on patients with the involvement of culturally postulated superhuman agents, and these actions are expected to bring about some change in the (religious) world. On the basis of this "action perspective", Uro describes how ritual innovations animate religious movements and groups, opening up a viewpoint in which rituals can be analysed through a basic grammar of action sequences, irrespective of the functions or verbal interpretations attached to them by participants, observers, or religious specialists. For the case of John the Baptist's actions of immersion (chapter 3), Uro's ritual analysis highlights the continuity between John's and Jesus' groups. In Chapter 4, Uro discusses ritual healing and exorcisms from Jesus to the *Apostolic Tradition* (a 2nd–3rd century treatise), revealing the importance of healing for the rise and the formation of early Christian groups; the texts and the stories analysed in this chapter cannot be lumped together under a single definition or theory of "ritual", and this is but an instance of the very nature of the pluralistic approach applied in Uro's study.

If the predominant perspective in chapters 3 and 4 is inspired by the cognitive theory of Lawson and McCauley, chapter 5 is focused on the question of ritual's facilitation of social life. Starting from anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport's (1999) assumptions, Uro highlights that all rituals involve communication and that they are intrinsically centred on acceptance. What is the role of ritual in cooperative communication? The most detailed answer to this question has been provided by scholars who apply a signalling approach to religious rituals, especially according to costly signalling or Commitment Signalling Theory (CST henceforth). Uro uses CST as a "middle-range theory of ritual or religious practices" that sheds light on the social dynamics of small-scale communities and/or groups like those described by Paul in his letters. Pauline assemblies provide an interesting case study for costly signalling, and CST contributes to clarify how ritual practices performed among Pauline *ekklesiai* facilitate cooperative

behaviour and group-solidarity. Uro analyses high-arousal rituals in the Corinthian *ekklesia*, supporting the view that meals, prophecy, and glossolalia (1 Cor. 11-14), along with other emotional rituals in the Pauline assemblies, function as cooperative signals; prophecy and glossolalia, as parts of the symposium that took place during the dinner party, may be seen as rituals that evoke synchronized arousal, as described in Paul's comments on the Corinthian practice.

Chapter 6 deals with the questions "how rituals generate religious knowledge", or "how rituals enhance religious belief and cognition". In this chapter, the discussion is focused on three cognitive themes:

1. Rituals generate *embodied* knowledge
2. Rituals generate *common* (shared) knowledge
3. Rituals accommodate *extended* knowledge

Concerning the first aspect, Uro discusses the example of early Christian baptismal practice, showing how the form of baptismal rite conveyed in itself another mode of knowledge, one that may be related, among other things, to hierarchy and power. Concerning the second aspect mentioned above (rituals generate *common*/shared knowledge), Uro underlines that early Christian baptism was not a public event comparable to civic rituals in the Greco-Roman world, but it was all the same a collective celebration within a household setting, i.e. a communal ritual normally witnessed by other adherents, in addition to the baptizer and the baptizand. As to the last topic mentioned above, Uro underlines that rituals accommodate extended knowledge, whereby "*extended* knowledge" means that cognition is the result of continuous interactions between brain, body, and the physical and social.

All things considered, this book can be understood as an introduction to the study of early Christian ritual and ritualized actions from the perspective of CSR, summing up various and not always converging investigations in the field. At the same time, this excellent work introduces new research perspectives, outlined by one of the most active scholars in the field. Uro also judiciously reflects on how to carry out inter- and cross-disciplinary studies on early Christianity in the multifaceted contemporary approaches on religion (especially those methods and theories related to socio-cognitive analyses), with a particular focus on contemporary "Bible Studies". These latter aspects of the book are particularly engaging.

As far as the contents of Uro's book are concerned, I would like to highlight a bibliographical lack, i.e. the absence of specific references to Daniel L. Smail's neurohistory (Smail 2008), an intriguing approach that might be

particularly useful for the questions raised by Uro (especially with regards to the chapter dedicated to ritual and religious knowledge, as well as to the more general question concerning the role of ritualized practices in the development of early Christian groups).

The idea that cognition is the result of a constant interaction between brain, body, and the physical and social environments is important for the historical analysis of ritualized practices among the early Christian groups. According to Smail's analysis,

the brain-body system is like a chemical sounding board that is highly responsive to inputs of all sorts, among them drugs. The most common stimuli to this system are not drugs, however. They arise instead from everyday phenotypic experiences – that is, things people do to their own bodies. Eating a good meal leads to higher dopamine levels in synapses. Sharing conversation with close friends can produce oxytocin and serotonin. Exercise elevates levels of pain-killing endorphins and enkephalins, a condition which can produce a mild state of euphoria not unlike that produced by opiates (Smail 2012: 43).

In other words, we cannot easily make an ontological distinction between the various stimuli that trigger changes in the brain-body system. Drugs and phenotypic experiences are equally psychotropic, since they are grounded in the same array of body chemicals. In his *On Deep History and the Brain*, published in 2008, Smail analysed how psychotropic mechanisms might have evolved in human societies, emphasizing that over the long span of human history, psychotropic mechanisms have probably become more thickly imbricated in human cultures. Psychotropics long predate the rise of chemical drugs diffused in the contemporary world. According to Smail, one of the most important features of psychotropic mechanisms is that they induce behavioural alterations. In a nutshell, this is the essence of *power*, whether it is the conventional understanding of power (one individual or group exerting control over another) or the more complex idea of “bio-power”, whereby individuals unconsciously discipline their own manners or behaviours through the internalization of norms or rules.

In Uro's analysis, ritualized actions in early Christianity produced measurable changes in brain activity (chapters 3 and 6). Uro emphasizes also that in our early Christian accounts, we find interesting descriptions of how ritualized actions create a basis for a social life (chapter 5). Rituals, promoted by religious authorities (there were *authorities* also among the *early* Christian groups), serve as an example of a range of psychotropic mechanisms that were built in the wake of the feedback responses from the neurophysiology of reward. Uro clearly demonstrates that early Christian rituals functioned as sources of dopamine and other chemical messengers.

Why such a variety of ritualized practices among the early Christians? Status anxiety of the sort suffered by many Jews in the Roman period has induced more or less permanently high levels of stress hormones (see Korner 2017: 22–80; for other kinds of coeval social and personal anxiety cf. also Woolf 2014; Martin 2014: 254–72; Martin 2015). It can be expected that sharing ritualized actions stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system; then, the demands of ritual (or psychotropy), i.e. the desires to alter one's own body chemistry, lie at the very heart of early Christian groups. As Smail has brilliantly observed, “A neurohistorical approach does not change the objects of study. What it offers is a new interpretive framework, where human neurophysiology is one of the environmental factors in macrohistorical change” (Smail 2008: 185).

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