Review


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*The Burning Saints: Cognition and Culture in the Fire-Walking Rituals of the Anastenaria* is the result of years of research and fieldwork with a religious group in Greece known as the Anastenaria. Dimitris Xygalatas splits the book into four distinct sections: historical, ethnographic, theoretical, and empirical. Overall this volume represents a great contribution to historians, anthropologists, and scientists interested in fire-walking and other “extreme” (i.e. high sensory pageantry) ritual behaviours. Its strengths come from its interdisciplinary approach to the topic, without compromising the integrity of one approach at the expense of rigour in another.

The book begins with a brief introduction to fire-walking rituals with a specific focus on the Greek fire-walking tradition. The second chapter delivers an in-depth analysis of the historical legitimacy of claims that the Anastenaria is historically descended from Dionysian cults. Xygalatas shows with eye-opening details and documentation that this claim is a belief that was constructed over the years, fueled by ethnocentricity, and has no historical legitimacy. The chapter goes on to outline how this history was taken by later ethnographers and repeated until it became accepted knowledge about the tradition.

Chapter 3 introduces the context for his ethnography, that of Greece generally and of the village of Agia Eleni, one of the villages where the Anastenaria perform their fire walking ritual. Xygalatas is careful to note the historical and contemporary tension that exists between the Greek Orthodox Church, which exercises wide ranging power within modern Greece, and the prevailing connection between ancient and modern Greece that the Anastenaria are believed to create.

Chapter 4 gives a report of Xygalatas’ personal ethnographic experience in the village of Agia Elina. This part of the book strikes a good balance
between the depth of detail needed in order to support later claims as well as the breadth needed to hold the interest of a reader who may not be a specialist in Greek fire-walking rituals.

The fifth chapter, entitled “Knowledge and Revelation among the Anastenaria”, offers the first glimpse of how the Anastenaria transmit beliefs about their tradition and their ritual. This is one of the most interesting chapters in the book because it outlines a number of trends that Xygalatas observed. For example, older Anastenaria were the only people who were able to offer an account of why the ritual is performed, however, their explanations differed. Newer fire-walkers would either say they didn’t know or would defer to an elder. Xygalatas does an elegant job of fitting this within earlier scholarly work on how participants are only able to offer confounded meanings, if any, as explanation for ritual behaviours (Lawson and McCauley 1990; Staal 1975). Xygalatas also touches on the importance of signs and miracles to the Anastenaria. Like other religious groups with high sensory pageantry experiences, such as Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians, narratives arise around the phenomena of visions or miracles where an individual might have a dream or even a bodily pain and the significance of the phenomenon is not fully understood until it is later incorporated into a schema centred on religious practice. There are stories of transformation pertaining to financial hardship, health, and – most importantly – being called to perform the fire-walk. However, this chapter is lacking in that it does not provide much detail concerning how the tradition of the Anastenaria fits within the religious system of the Greek Orthodox Church, a point which will be expanded upon later.

Chapter 6 is one of the best summaries of the relationship between cognitive science and religion available. The chapter provides an overview of cognitive science from its roots and how it came to be applied to religion through anthropology and religious studies. The citations in this section are in themselves a good introductory reading list for those interested in cognitive and experimental anthropology. The chapter develops by introducing the traditional, culture-centered, approaches to religion before introducing the scientifically inspired approaches to religion starting with Guthrie (1993), Sperber (1996), and Boyer (2001). The chapter also presents the two most prominent theories of religious ritual, ritual competence theory (Lawson and McCauley 1990; McCauley and Lawson 2002), and the theory of divergent modes of religiosity (Whitehouse 2004).

Chapter 7 follows this by broadly addressing scientific approaches to understanding why humans would perform “costly rituals” such as fire-walking, and how these rituals might have endured over time. This chapter outlines, in quasi-evolutionary terms, how rituals might prevail even
though they are performed at extreme costs to the performer; Xygalatas offers a direct analogy to the peacock’s tail, which although elaborate and attractive to potential peahens, slows down the peacock and makes it a likely target for predation. This analogy, while theoretically interesting, has a definitional issue in that it is hard to define what practices are being selected for: is it the ritual or only aspects of the ritual? It also fails to address the possibility that “extinction” or “selection” may be due to confounding factors unrelated to the ritual practice itself, i.e. a practice endures through analogy to evolutionary drift. These problems are not so much issues with Xygalatas’ use and presentation as it is with using an evolutionary analogy to explain the persistence of “cultural traits”.

Chapter 8 focuses on how one can utilize Whitehouse’s theory of divergent modes of religiosity (2004) to understand how high arousal and emotion can affect motivation transmission within a ritual system. Although this section is well presented, it is lacking in an explanation of how the tradition of the Anastenaria interact with the (apparently) superordinate tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church. While the practices of the Anastenaria are undoubtedly emotional and relatively infrequent, they utilize the same icons and saints as the larger Greek Orthodox Church. They also seem to be subordinate hierarchically to the Greek Orthodox Church in that earlier chapters outline the tension created when the Church “repossessed” the local icons necessary for the ritual (pp. 17–19). This warrants a number of questions: Do the Anastenaria attend regular Greek Orthodox services? If so, how does this affect their beliefs and practices? Does this affect the spread of the Anastenaria to towns and villages outside of Agia Elina, if so, how? These critiques are not meant to detract from the superb job done by Xygalatas but to introduce new questions that might push not only this research, but the theoretical foundations it utilizes, forward.

Chapters 9 and 10 are the most unique and interesting chapters of the volume. Chapter 9 relies on the historical, anthropological, and psychological approaches outlined before, which were presented within an evolutionary framework, but it supplements this with physiological and neuro-biological findings. This creates an explanatory basis not only for the psychological phenomena outlined in previous chapters, but also how the cultural context of the ritual system can in turn effect mental processes. Xygalatas concludes with a thought-provoking conclusion, which argues that approaching complex human behaviours in a purely-reductionist manner is not sufficient to explain the variety of cultural behaviours available throughout the human population. Instead, researchers should utilize the “multiplicity of analytical levels” and that “Anything less will lead to a diminished view of culture and a fragmented understanding of human behavior” (p. 189).

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In conclusion, Xygalatas offers the most well-presented, defended, and empirically backed, overview of “extreme rituals” available. His attention to historical, anthropological, and scientific detail will hopefully become a prototype for future publications and research programmes in the field. Throughout its chapters the book offers valuable new insight to specialists of similar historical, anthropological, cognitive, and physiological topics. The book ultimately is a contribution to many fields but above all else, it is a contribution to interdisciplinary and scientific approaches to complex phenomena.

References


