

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ritual in the study of early Christianity

RISTO URO

INTRODUCTION

SINCE the first decade of the present century, an increasing number of scholars have been attracted by the use of ‘ritual’ as a conceptual and theoretical tool for the study of the history and cultural world of early Christianity. The roots of this growing interest can be traced back to the History of Religion School in biblical studies, the influence of social-scientific theory, especially social-cultural anthropology, and the increased openness of historians of early liturgy to ritual theory (Uro 2016: 7–22). Yet the most important reason for the growth of research on ritual in the study of early Christianity has probably been the emergence of ritual studies as a named and recognized field (Grimes 1995; 2014; Bell 1997; 2005; Post 2015; Stephenson 2015; see also Uro 2016: 23–6). The work of pioneering scholars, such as Ronald Grimes and Catherine Bell, and collective projects, such as the Heidelberg *Ritualdynamik* Research Centre (active from 2002 to 2013; see Kreinath et al. 2008b), towards the systematizing and development of knowledge and theories of ritual have been exerting an influence over many fields and disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including the study of early Christianity. In religious studies, the cognitive movement (dubbed since the early years of the new century the ‘cognitive science of religion’) has advanced a number of new theories of ritual, contributing to the surge of studies on ritual in various fields dealing with religion and culture (for cognitive theories of ritual, see Xygalatas 2013: 107–23; Uro 2016: 41–70; Czachesz 2017: 88–121; see also Chapters 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 16, 18, 19, 23, 24, 27, and 35 in this volume).

The application of insights and perspectives from ritual studies may nevertheless pose a challenge to scholars of early Christianity: the study of ritual spans many areas and issues, which may not always look particularly pertinent to the kinds of questions these scholars usually ask. Thus, one key issue in the ritual analysis of early Christian history

is relevance. In addition to insights and theories from social and cultural studies, which are more familiar to students of early Christianity, the field of ritual studies draws on research carried out, for example, in experimental psychology and in various branches of the evolutionary and cognitive sciences. These areas of knowledge may seem quite remote from the study of early Christianity, and irrelevant to the textual, historical, and cultural questions that largely engage scholars in this field.

This chapter aims to provide a guide to the reader to an understanding of the nature of ritual studies as an emerging interdisciplinary field, with particular emphasis on its relevance to the study of the history of early Christianity. How can either academic theorization about ritual or empirical studies of ritual behaviour enrich and even transform the ways in which we investigate and reconstruct the early centuries of Christian history? What is the added value of the concept of 'ritual' for topics that can be and have been studied fruitfully without considering a ritual perspective? What kind of new questions do ritual approaches introduce? How can we study the rituals of ancient peoples on the basis of textual and archaeological sources, which offer insufficient or biased information about the actual practices?

RITUAL STUDIES AS A FIELD OF STUDY

The academic study of ritual is rooted in the identification, by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pioneers in anthropology and the study of religion, of the concept of 'ritual' as a special category of behaviour present in every culture (see Asad 1993: 73–87, for an insightful analysis),¹ and in the subsequent theory-formation and empirical research attached to this concept in social-cultural anthropology, sociology, comparative religion, psychology, theology, philosophy, and other fields. The emergence of 'ritual studies' as a field of its own from the late 1970s onwards is closely associated with the work of Ronald Grimes. According to Paul Post, the growing interest in ritual during the 1970s and 1980s was partly connected to the liturgical renewal movement in the wake of Vatican II—a movement in which Grimes participated as an expert (Post 2015). Grimes himself has variously described ritual studies as 'a newly consolidated field within religious studies' (Grimes 1985: 1) and 'a field of inquiry reaching across disciplinary boundaries', bringing together the interests of collaborating fields (Grimes 1987: 422). In the preface to the second edition of *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* he is somewhat more modest, defending what he calls a middle position between those who define the study of ritual as an interesting topic carried out in different disciplines and those who claim for it a status as a crucial interdisciplinary field (Grimes 1995: xix). More recently, the practitioners of ritual studies have endorsed the identity of the field as an independent

¹ For a detailed account of the background of ritual theory in the theological disputes of the Reformation and in medieval theology, see Burke (1987: 223–38); Buc (2001:161–247); Muir (2005: 163–201).

‘platform for systematic academic research into ritual’ (Post 2015) or as ‘a distinct academic field that gives special attention to the performance aspect of the rites themselves’ (Duntley 2005: 7758).²

Three characteristics of this newly established field can be singled out as relevant to our discussion. They also represent, to different degrees, a shift from the earlier study of ritual carried out under different disciplines. The field of ritual studies is characterized by: (1) a pluralistic approach to the definition of ‘ritual’; (2) an increased interest in theory (although showing a wide spectrum of different strategies); and (3) the application of interdisciplinary perspectives on ritual.

Current ritual theorists do not usually define ritual as ‘a thing out there’, but rather emphasize its nature as a scholarly ‘construction’ or as a ‘family resemblance’ or ‘fuzzy set’ (‘polythetic’) concept (Snoek 2008; Sax 2010; Grimes 2014: 186–210). A pluralistic approach to the concept of ritual does not erase the identity of ritual studies, any more than differing definitions of ‘religion’ obscure the identity of religious studies. The key concepts of academic fields are often hard to define in precise terms: political scientists disagree as to the appropriate definition of ‘politics’, biologists debate as to how ‘life’ is to be identified, and so on—although the degree of ‘fuzziness’ in definitions naturally varies.

This broad range of different definitions does not mean that that definitions do not matter. At the beginning of their chapters, many of the contributors to this volume offer a working definition of ritual for the purposes of their analysis. These should not be understood as universal descriptions of a class that can be identified unequivocally if certain criteria or characteristics are met; rather, definitions are tools for analysing the phenomena under scrutiny from a ritual point of view. To be sure, some theorists criticize the very concept of ritual as a theoretical construction, seeing it as an expression of a ‘particular hegemony of Western intellectual life’ (Bell 1992: 6), or regarding it as ‘dangerous’ and ‘reductionist’ (Buc 2001). But we cannot dispense with definitions (see Franek 2014, for the concept of ‘religion’). The post-modern criticism of definitions loses much of its force when a pluralistic approach to ritual (or, for that matter, ‘religion’) is adopted. Theories, including definitions, become a set of tools for interpreting phenomena that are amenable to a varying degree to ritual analysis, without strong epistemic claims necessarily being made as to the object of the study.

The issue of definition is related to the increased interest in ritual theory, i.e. in the use of theories of rituals to describe, analyse, and explain phenomena that are identified as ritual-like. Most historians of ancient religions working on ritual, or even students of ritual more generally, do not develop their own theories, but are, as Grimes puts it, ‘theory-consumers’ (Grimes 2014: 171). ‘Theory’ is a very broad concept, and theory-consumption in contemporary scholarship on ritual can mean a broad spectrum of

² To be sure, this identity should be described as ‘soft’; there are not, to my knowledge, any academic chairs or doctoral programmes in ritual studies (see Post 2015). But an identity as a ‘field’ is an important factor in recognizing that ritual is a sufficiently autonomous domain of behaviour, which can be analysed from various perspectives—just as the field of musical studies investigates music in theory, history, culture, performance, and so on (Uro 2016: 25; see also Gruenwald 2003: 13–19).

scholarly styles, from the strict testing of a single theory to cherry-picking among multiple theories. Grimes' analysis of the state of the art in ritual studies sees more eclectic than focused theorizing:

[L]et's use 'theory' in its broad contemporary sense to mean any set of generalizations, key concepts, root metaphors, and determinative vocabulary that animate the characteristic moves of one's method. Most students of ritual don't use a theory even in this loose and open sense. They rarely utilize and test a single theory, much less invent one; rather, they cherry-pick multiple theories. Searching for trenchant, supportive quotations, they cite this writer and that . . . , or select a school of thought (symbolic anthropology, biogenetic structuralism, or, cognitive anthropology). (Grimes 2014: 170)

The use of multiple theories, however, does not necessarily mean cherry-picking. The selection of a set of theories to be used in analysis can be well-grounded and reflective. The editors of the volume *Theorizing Rituals* contend that '[i]n modern scholarly practice of the study of ritual, one will . . . probably always need to refer to more than one theory' (Kreinath et al. 2008a: xxiii). By this claim they mean that there is a difference between the age of 'grand theories', i.e. all-inclusive and broad-sweeping theories of ritual, and more recent approaches, which only seek to provide partial explanations for phenomena that can be identified as rituals. Kreinath et al. do not give an example of what they regard as 'grand theories', but one might think of approaches advanced by the 'big names' in the field in the latter half of the last century, such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Roy Rappaport. I take Kreinath and colleagues' statement not as arguing that grand theories are obsolete—if that were so, their work in collecting and systematizing the theoretical discussions of past generations would have been pointless—but as proposing that theoretical pluralism can be a helpful strategy when the topic of research is defined by a 'fuzzy set' concept, such as ritual. For a humanities scholar, it is seldom satisfactory to limit oneself to testing or applying only one specific theory for the kinds of materials he or she is investigating. This may be particularly true of the historian of early Christianity, whose sources provide only glimpses of past practices and do not always allow rigorous testing of a single theory (for theoretical pluralism in the study of early Christian rituals, see Uro 2016: 62–4).

Interdisciplinarity is a key feature of ritual studies. Ritual theorists increasingly work across disciplinary boundaries and draw on knowledge and research from more than one disciplinary tradition. Before the emergence of ritual studies as a field of its own, ritual was studied and theorized under a number of different disciplines, including anthropology, comparative religion, psychology, and biology. Interdisciplinary activities became increasingly popular in academic settings in the latter half of the twentieth century, challenging the earlier structure of knowledge as domains of disciplinary specialization (Klein 2017). 'Interdisciplinarity', along with the related terms 'multidisciplinarity' and 'transdisciplinarity', refer to a wide arrangement of coordinating, contextualizing, and integrative activities in the sciences and humanities.

Interdisciplinarity is often distinguished from multidisciplinary curricula and research activities, in which different disciplines are juxtaposed but remain separate and maintain their original identity. Many conferences, anthologies, and research projects advertising themselves as ‘interdisciplinary’ are in fact multidisciplinary, in the sense that they ‘combine separate disciplinary approaches without proactively integrating them around a designed theme, question, or problem’ (Klein 2017). Interdisciplinarity, in contrast, entails a stronger integration of the contributing fields in methodology, terminology, procedures, theory formation, and so on.

Another distinction can be made using the metaphors of bridge-building and restructuring (Group for Research and Innovation 1975; Klein 2017). In the former, the collaboration occurs between established disciplines, while in the latter elements from several disciplines are detached to form a new coherent whole. The emergence of ritual studies is an example of a restructuring process, in which research and education activities are built up around a problem area or topic and studied by using resources from several fields and disciplines (compare, for example, criminology). Yet the field of ritual studies is far from having attained the status of an established discipline, and is still mostly practised under the aegis of established disciplines and departments (religious studies, social-cultural anthropology, theology, performance studies, etc.). The inclination towards restructuring and genuine interdisciplinarity should nevertheless be borne in mind when ritual studies approaches are applied to the ancient world.

The ‘bridge-building’ metaphor is particularly appropriate in describing the role of ritual studies as an integrative field across the great divide between the sciences and the humanities, between ‘the two cultures’, to use C. P. Snow’s well-known phrase (Snow 1993). Drawing on insights and research from psychology, cognitive science, and biology (ethology) as well as from religious studies, social anthropology, performance studies, and so on, ritual studies as a field is an example of a growing interest among humanities scholars in models that advance collaboration and integration between the sciences and the humanities. Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard have advocated a new ‘consilience’ approach (cf. Wilson 1998), intended to create a ‘shared framework for the sciences and humanities’ (Slingerland and Collard 2012: 3–4). While not all ritual scholars are convinced of the value of science–humanities integration, the field as a whole provides an effective framework for the interplay between cultural approaches and scientific models of explanation (see also Stephenson’s discussion in Chapter 2 in this volume). This Handbook reflects the current status of ritual studies, embracing both analyses that promote integrative approaches and ones that are ‘heavily rooted in cultural explanation’ (see Bell 2005: 7849).

STUDYING ANCIENT RITUALS

Historical research into ritual can be seen as one form of ritual studies (Post 2015: 16). Like any historian interested in past rituals, the scholar of early Christianity faces the

challenge posed by the scarcity and haphazard nature of the sources and by the fact that we can observe only textual (or archaeological) representations of ritual behaviour, not actual rites. A quick answer to this is that the same challenge concerns all historical phenomena, not just those topics that can be categorized as rituals (Muir 2005: 8). We cannot directly observe any event or phenomenon in the distant past. But there is a little more to the issue than that.

Perhaps the most passionate criticism against using ritual theory in the study of the distant past has been expressed by the medievalist Philippe Buc, in his *The Dangers of Ritual* (Buc 2001). For Buc, the concept of ritual is 'reductionist, too-often vague' and 'essentially alien' to the medieval world. Throughout his work, Buc places ritual in implicit quotation marks, so as to suggest that there are other terms, concepts, or modes of interpretation that are better fitted to the materials he is investigating (2001: 1–2). The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, Buc presents case studies of texts by writers from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in order to explicate 'the medieval native's anthropology', as opposed to that of the twentieth-century social scientist (2001: 3). In Part II, he attempts to trace the intellectual history of the social sciences since the French Revolution, arguing that 'ritual is the multilayered product of a *longue-durée* diachronic stratification' (2001: 2), carrying within itself a detrimental 'baggage' that ultimately invalidates its use as an instrument of historical analysis.

Buc's argument that one should focus on emic (native) accounts of cultural phenomena, not on etic ones (an outsider's perspective), has often been voiced in cultural studies in the past few decades. This sentiment has been popular among anthropologists and scholars of religion, and has resulted in detailed ethnographies in which a particular cultural trait is examined on its own terms in those societies where it is found. Yet the thesis that 'one should master a culture's grammar, but not think thoughts none of its members ever thought' (Buc 2001: 226–7) is untenable for a number of reasons. Despite the fact that many recent approaches emphasize reflexivity, subjectivity, and particularity, it is generally recognized that both emic and etic approaches are needed in the study of religion and culture. As I. M. Lewis noted in a response to the critics of his *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (1971), 'how else can we understand "other cultures" except comparatively in terms of our own concepts, constructs and language?' (Lewis 1989: 14; cited also in Boddy 1994: 408). The rejection of the concept of ritual or any other etic concept in the study of the past would in effect lead to rejecting comparativism as a basic method of inquiry. This is not desirable or even possible, as succinctly put by William Paden:

While comparativism in the study of religion for many has become associated with the sins of the discipline—colonialism, essentialism, theologism, and anti-contextualism—it simply remains that there is *no* study of religion without cross-cultural categories, analysis, and perspective. Knowledge in any field advances by finding connections between the specific and the generic, and one cannot even carry out ethnographic or historical work without utilizing transcontextual concepts. Like it or not, we attend the world not in terms of objects but in terms of categories.

Wherever there is a theory, wherever there is a concept, there is a comparative program. (Paden 2000: 182, italics original)

Paden's statement is a powerful rebuttal of the (post-modern) aversion to transcontextual or cross-cultural concepts. 'Ritual' and other concepts relevant to the study of ritual, such as 'performance', 'magic', 'purification', 'sacrifice', 'pilgrimage', 'divination', 'ritual healing', 'initiation', 'rite of passage', and others used in this volume are heuristic tools that facilitate the historian's efforts to understand ancient cultures and people. The field of ritual studies provides a framework for discussing the advantages and disadvantages of these and other (possibly better) concepts and the theories attached to them. Discarding 'ritual' as an analytical tool merely prompts the question of what should replace it; contrary to his initial promise, Buc's study does not offer an answer to that question.

However, Buc's tracing of the intellectual trajectory of 'ritual' from medieval theology to twentieth-century social science is an important contribution to the discussion. His insightful analysis highlights the importance of understanding the historical roots of the intellectual ancestors on whose shoulders ritual theorists have built their current work (see also Burke 1987; Muir 2005). The value of Buc's genealogy is not intrinsically connected to his nihilistic attitude towards ritual theory and social-scientific approaches to historiography.³ The target of his criticism seems to be a certain kind of functionalism, rather than more recent anthropological theorizing (Walsham 2003), let alone cognitive theories of ritual.

Textuality should not be seen as an obstacle that invalidates or severely limits a ritual approach to the ancient world. It is of course true that texts do not offer a direct window onto the actual rites reflected in sources. Present-day scholars of early Christian rituals seldom display such naivety in their analyses of sources. In the course of a long history, biblical and early Christian scholars have developed a refined set of source-critical methods, which are normally integrated with or assumed in the study of early Christian rituals (for the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in liturgical studies, see Bradshaw 2002: 14–20). Moreover, the relationship between text and ritual is an important question in itself, and explorations of the issue by ritual theorists provide self-evident resources for the examination of early Christian texts (see especially Petersen, Chapter 21 in this volume). There are a number of ways in which rites and texts can be interwoven (Strecker 1999: 78–80; DeMaris 2008: 5–6). Texts not only describe, reflect, or offer authoritative—or authoritative-sounding—instructions about rituals; they can also become ritual instruments or objects in themselves. The public reading or chanting of texts among early Christians often took place in ritual contexts (Uro 2013a). Writing down a text, for example, a divine name or formula, can itself be analysed as a ritual or magical act, heightening the efficacy of a ritual (Levy 2012). Or conversely, the rhetorical

³ Many of the points made by Buc are in fact similar to those advocated by Catherine Bell in her work on ritual. Thus, Buc is siding with the post-modern and culturalist camp within ritual studies. For Buc's positive comment on Bell, see Buc (2001: 248).

persuasiveness of a text may be heightened by evoking ritual experiences among the addressees (see Petersen, Chapter 21 in this volume).

Rather than focusing on the limitations imposed by textual (or archaeological) representations on a ritual approach to early Christianity, the emphasis should be on the ways in which the field of ritual studies enriches the historical and textual analysis of early Christian materials.

EARLY CHRISTIANITY THROUGH THE LENS OF RITUAL

The benefits of ritual theory for the study of early Christianity have been demonstrated in a number of recent studies (for book-length studies, see DeMaris 2008; Taussig 2009; Lamoreaux 2013; Turley 2015; Uro 2016; Blidstein 2017; DeMaris et al. 2018). As the conclusion to this chapter, I want to focus on just a few points, which in my judgement describe the promises of the new approach and highlight the rationale and structure of this volume.

Advocates of ritual theory have noted the neglect of ritual in mainline scholarship on Christian beginnings (DeMaris 2008: 1–5; Uro 2016: 7–8). In particular, if early Christianity is approached from the perspective of history and religion, ritual ought to have its place in the story of Christian origins. Myth (or belief)⁴ and ritual have long been considered to constitute the key elements of religion (or, more accurately, what is constructed as religion), and any analysis focusing on early Christianity merely as a myth or a system of beliefs would thus be deficient. One way of putting this is to argue that religions evolve as ‘packages’, consisting of beliefs and rituals (Henrich 2009; see also Pyysiäinen 2011). As belief-ritual packages, religious traditions are combinations in which both aspects interact and influence one another; hence the debate as to whether one of these should be preferred over the other as the heart of religion is pointless (cf. Segal 2009: 66). It is difficult to imagine any culture of shared beliefs without its knowledge being sustained by ritual practices (Uro 2016: 154). On the other hand, religious beliefs seem to support the efficient functioning of rituals (Sosis 2006; see also Bulbulia, Chapter 6 in this volume).

Thus, one promise of ritual theory is that it helps create a more complete picture of early Christian history. To explain the rise of the movement, its practices and institutions, the spread of Christian beliefs, and so on, without considering the role of ritual is to dispense with a fundamental social force in the formation of religious movements.

There are a number of trends in early Christian studies that support the closer integration of ritual theory into the field. Since the 1970s, many early Christian scholars

⁴ ‘Myth’ is of course not synonymous with ‘belief’, but myth is often understood to imply some form of belief (Stringer 2008: 40), and belief and ritual occur as dichotomies similar to myth and ritual.

have been interested in social history and social realia, and have criticized approaches in which early Christianity is understood as the history of ideas, or—even more narrowly—as the history of doctrines (Meeks 2005: 165). Today, the study of social realia in the early Christian world is often understood in a framework of elite versus popular religiosities (MacMullen 2009; see also Uro 2013b: 184–7), of gendered approaches (Osiek and MacDonald 2006), or in terms of ‘everyday religion’ or ‘lived religion’ (Raja and Rübke 2015; Raja, Chapter 8 in this volume). Ritual theory accords with and enriches all these approaches, and offers a corrective to a biased understanding of early Christianity as a *system* of beliefs and practices; such an understanding ignores most people’s day-to-day religious experience, or in Martin Stringer’s phrase, their interaction with the ‘non-empirical other’ (Stringer 2008).

Embodiment, often referred to by early Christian scholars, is a concept of particular relevance for the discussion of how early Christian studies can be advanced by ritual approaches. Theorizing about the human body, in both its social and its biological dimensions, is fundamental to the study of ritual (see Zuesse 2005; DeMaris 2018: 5). Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, for example, with its emphasis on the importance of the body and bodily experiences in the social world, has been highly influential and has inspired a host of studies on early Christian social and cultural life, often with important implications for the study of ritual (e.g. Stowers 1995; 2011; Ullucci, Chapter 16 in this volume). Catherine Bell has applied and developed Bourdieu’s theory of practice in the context of ritual theory. A key concept for Bell is the ‘ritualized body’, i.e. ‘a body invested with a “sense” of ritual’. Such bodies are produced by the process of ritualization ‘through the interaction of the body with a structuring and structured environment’ (Bell 1992: 98). A promising avenue for enhancing our understanding of the interaction of the body with its environment is the embodied cognition approach, introduced in this volume by Eva Kundtová Klocová and Armin Geertz (Chapter 5). Relying on the growing empirical evidence for the interplay of human cognition with the body and its environment, they argue for the ‘4E approach’, i.e. the position that cognition is embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive. The profound reliance on experimental and empirical research by these writers, as also by several other authors in this volume (see, e.g. Chapters 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, 16, 24, 27) would seem to contrast with the approaches articulated by Bell and others, ‘rooted in cultural explanation’ (Bell 2005: 7849), yet the very idea of the cultural embeddedness of human cognition runs against such an opposition.⁵

⁵ In a concluding chapter of the recent edited volume *Early Christian Ritual Life*, Hal Taussig emphasizes the ‘significant contrast’ between the approach applied in that volume and my socio-cognitive approach in *Ritual and Christian Beginnings* (as well of others’ using cognitive science in the study of early Christianity), their approach representing less ‘full blown ideology’ and ‘universalistic hubris’ (Taussig 2018: 185). I contend, however, that the approaches applied in *Early Christian Ritual Life* and in *Ritual and Christian Beginnings* are complementary, not mutually exclusive, and the growing field of embodied cognition could be one of those approaches that creates a common ground for integrating cultural and cognitive approaches (see also Uro 2016: 159).

Finally, the application of a ritual perspective to the study of early Christianity creates a platform for interdisciplinary collaboration and integrative approaches, both of which stimulate new questions and enrich old ones. In this volume, interdisciplinary collaboration is particularly visible in Part I, in which many authors do not come from the field of early Christian studies, but are religious studies scholars and ritual theorists. This Part raises some of the most fundamental themes and perspectives in recent theoretical work in the field of ritual studies. Some themes are ultimately rooted in classic attempts to explain religion and ritual (cf. ‘identity and emotion’, Davies, Chapter 4, and ‘cooperation’, Bulbulia, Chapter 6), others are more recent themes in ritual theory, such as ‘ritualization’ (Stephenson, Chapter 2), ‘performance, practice, and action’ (Stephenson, Chapter 3), ‘embodiment’ (Kundtová Klocová and Geertz, Chapter 5) and ‘transmission’ (Czachesz, Chapter 7). The chapters in Part I are theoretical, although the authors also give examples of ways in which the theories and approaches they introduce can shed light on early Christian and other ancient practices.

Part II deals with what can be called ‘mid-level theoretical themes’ and ‘ritual frames’ in the socio-cultural world of early Christianity. There is no clear-cut line between these two terms. *Mid-level themes* here refers to such topics as ‘magic’ (Czachesz, Chapter 11), ‘purification’ (Kazen, Chapter 13), ‘sacrifice’ (Ullucci, Chapter 16), ‘pilgrimage’ (Feldt, Chapter 17), ‘initiation’ (Martin, Chapter 19), and ‘mortuary rituals’ (Gudme, Chapter 20), all of which have been intensively theorized in ritual studies. *Ritual frame* can refer to various things; I follow Stephenson’s use of the term and take it to refer to times, spaces, cultural domains, performances, objects, etc., which govern or guide our understanding of actions as rituals (Stephenson 2010: 46–9, referring to Goffman 1974). Ancient sanctuaries (Raja, Chapter 8), associations (Kloppenborg, Chapter 9), household and family (Dolansky, Chapter 10), communal meals (Ascough, Chapter 12), prayer (Aune, Chapter 14), music (Weimer, Chapter 15), divination (Nissinen, Chapter 18), and textuality (Petersen, Chapter 21) can be analysed as ritual frames, which structure and invoke certain ritual actions as well as set up interpretative frameworks for them. These topics can be and have been studied without reference to ritual, but analyses from a ritual perspective allow us to harness the rich and mostly neglected resources of ritual studies in relation to them. Thus, for example, divination in the ancient Mediterranean world has been studied as a topic in its own right. Ritual theory, however, is helpful because it is difficult to explain ‘the way ritual works . . . without reference to its ritual aspect’ (Nissinen, Chapter 18). Music clearly does not coincide with the concept of ritual; yet, there is considerable overlap between the two domains referred to by these concepts (Weimer, Chapter 15). Communal meals in Roman antiquity offer a valuable case study for analysing how ritual functions to both create social bonding and works to enact the extant hierarchical stratifications (Ascough, Chapter 12).

Parts III and IV, in turn, focus on specifically Christian ritual practices from the beginning of the movement up to the fifth century. Many of the topics discussed in these sections are familiar from histories of early Christian liturgy, but here they embedded

in and informed by the ritual studies framework of the Handbook. For example, the baptism practices of early Christians are situated in a larger context, as part of the ritual use of water in the ancient Mediterranean world (DeMaris, Chapter 22), or considered in the light of modern theorizing about rites of passage (Bradshaw, Chapter 30). Furthermore, ritual theory can contribute to 'bridging gaps' in the history of early Christian meal practices by providing concepts and findings from the behavioural, cognitive, and social sciences, and helping the scholar to evaluate 'what is more and less likely' (Kaše, Chapter 23) as well as dealing with the 'gap between historical liturgy and present practice' (Larson-Miller, Chapter 31, in relation to the study of eucharistic developments from the second century to the fifth century). The chapters in Part IV, more specifically, demonstrate ways in which the history of early liturgy can benefit by drawing on ritual studies and related approaches. These include Bourdieu's theory of practice (Phillips, Chapter 33, on prayer; Hunter, Chapter 36, on weddings); the 'ritual gaze' (Jensen, Chapter 34, on early Christian art); embodied experience (Harkins and Dunkle, Chapter 35, on hymns and psalmody; Finn, Chapter 38, on fasting); gendered approaches to ritual (Day, Chapter 37, on women's ritual); everyday religiosity (Eastman, Chapter 39, on relic veneration and pilgrimage). Yet other perspectives involve the theorizing of ritual's relation to time (Day, Chapter 32) and space (Latham, Chapter 40, on the Christianization of the urban space).

The application of ritual theory, understood in a broad sense, has not merely redefined old topics and perspectives, but has also stimulated entirely new ones. The chapters in Part III investigate, for example, ways in which game theory and signalling theory can shed light on rituals of reintegration in the early church (Roitto, Chapter 24), how the anthropological debate over ritual healing can increase our understanding of early Christian healing practices (Theissen, Chapter 25), and how the 'physiological and neurological capacity of ritual' informs reports of ritual experience, ecstasy, and spirit possession in early Christian sources (Shantz, Chapter 27). Ritual theory also allows us to take a fresh approach to sacrificial practices and language in earliest Christianity, illuminating both ritual changes and some of the most fundamental theological concepts (Eberhart, Chapter 26). Previous scholarship has also by and large overlooked the role played by ritual in the emergence of the church hierarchy (Hysten, Chapter 27) and in the rise of orthodoxy (Perkins, Chapter 28).

In sum, the present volume seeks to promote interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing on the newly established field of ritual studies to better explain and understand the history and culture of early Christianity.

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