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Review of the doctoral dissertation by Anastasiia Shabalina M.A: „The question of the relationship between religious ritual and religious beliefs in the cognitive science of religion” (Związek między rytuałem religijnym a przekonaniem religijnym w ujęciu kognitywistyki religii) in the field of journalism and mass communication (*Communication and Media Studies*) submitted to the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism (Wydział Nauk Politycznych i Dziennikarstwa) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Advisor: Prof. UAM Andrzej Klawiter, Ph.D., Adam Mickiewicz University; Co-advisor: Maciej Raś, Ph.D., Poznań 2025.

The doctoral thesis under review was written in English, it consists of 154 pages in four chapters and contains 10 figures. Figures 1, 2 and 3 also appear in the article: A. Shabalina/A. Klawiter, Rethinking Lawson and McCauley: The return of beliefs into Ritual Form Hypothesis, 2025, *Studia Religiológica* 58(1):1, DOI: [10.4467/20844077SR.25.001.22145](https://doi.org/10.4467/20844077SR.25.001.22145)

Early twentieth-century research in religious rituals is primarily situated in the area of anthropology, sociology, and comparative religion. Émile Durkheim, in his seminal *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 1912/1915), argues that rituals are crucial to social cohesion, strengthening communal bonds and separating the sacred from the profane. James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890) explores ritual practices, myths, and forms of magic, interpreting them through the lens of comparative anthropology. Modern research in religious rituals was revived about thirty years ago by T.E. Lawson & R.N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (1990); McCauley & Lawson, *Who owns 'culture'?* (1996); and H. Whitehouse, *Inside the cult* (1995). While the authors of these studies come from different disciplines, they argue that many aspects of religious thought and behaviour can be understood by looking at basic mental processes that appear across cultures. In other words, religion is not a unique domain — it is shaped by the same kinds of cognitive processes that influence other forms of human thought behaviour; that is, processes rooted in our evolutionary history. This new approach has been called the “Cognitive Science of Religion” (CSR) and it marks the cognitive turn in the study of religion. While Durkheim saw ritual as a mechanism of social cohesion (the sacred), Lawson and McCauley view it primarily as a structured form of action processed by the mind. CSR is highly relevant today and deserves closer analysis, not least because, to varying degrees, it challenges and critically questions cultural studies research methods. Most importantly, CSR has made marked improvement in the study of issues related to ritual, such as the cognitive representation of ritual (Lawson & McCauley, 1990).

Anastasiia Shabalina’s dissertation offers a study of religious rituals within the CSR framework and, as stated in the Introduction, her “theoretical investigation draws on three key perspectives, each offering a distinct lens on the cognitive dimension of ritual: the linguistic perspective (Lawson & McCauley, 1990), the ritual stance theory, which connects ritual with mechanisms of social cohesion and group formation (Whitehouse, 2021) and the enactivist perspective (Barsalou et al., 2005; Teehan, 2024). This multi-theoretical approach is based on the assumption that such a complex question cannot be adequately addressed through a single

methodological framework” (p. 3). The above quotation also reflects the structure of the entire doctoral thesis.

In the first chapter entitled: “Ritual and belief through a linguistic lens: a reinterpretation of *Rethinking Religion* by E. T. Lawson and R. N. McCauley” (pp. 6-39), the starting point is the question: what kind of relationship between religious belief and ritual can be derived from E. T. Lawson and R. N. McCauley CSR theory. The author argues for a modification of their theory by extending the general structure of a religious ritual with two mediating systems: a concept selection system which provides the basic conceptual elements for constructing a structure of a religious ritual, and a belief selection system „which extracts and prioritizes religious beliefs that motivate ritual performance” (p. 103). This separation into two systems, according to the author, helps explain why the belief in the primacy of the superhuman agent in religious rituals need not be shared by the human participant (p. 23). According to the Ritual Form Hypothesis developed by T. Lawson and R. N. McCauley, the position of the superhuman agent (SA) within the structure of a ritual determines how often the ritual is repeated, whether it will be reversible, how central it is within a given religion, and how universal or solemn it is. The author notes that the theory of ritual competence (Lawson & McCauley) appears to be well suited for modeling and testing (p. 38). Dissertation aims to reinterpret the structure of ritual representation proposed by Lawson & McCauley in the context of the role of belief within it. As a result of this modification, the analysed model retains its representational-linguistic character, but at the same time becomes more open to the empirical study of specific individual mental states (beliefs) connected with ritual action (see e.g., pp. 22, 39, 93).

The second chapter of the thesis entitled “Social aspect of ritual and belief: bridging individual and collective levels” (pp. 40-55), discusses the social dimension of ritual, and shows how to bridge the gap between individual participation in a ritual and the outcome that arises from shared ritual practice. The author draws on H. Whitehouse's concept of ritual mindset discussed in *Transmissive frequency, ritual, and exegesis* (2001) which argues that ritual actions do not require a dedicated cognitive module. The dissertation argues for a central role of Whitehouse's research in the cognitive science of ritual, particularly due to his introduction of two key concepts: the ritual stance and the modes of religiosity. The author goes on to reinterpret the ritual stance as a specific application of D. Dennett's intentional stance (pp. 42-44). The modes of religiosity theory is in turn characterized by the distinction between the doctrinal and the imagistic mode. These two modes are based on different cognitive forms of memory functions, and, as a result, influence the social and political development of religious traditions in different ways. Thanks to this reinterpretation, we receive several important insights: a) ritual behaviour can be understood using the same explanatory model that governs ordinary intentional actions (p. 46); b) the analogy between rituals and compulsive actions is dismissed; c) individual and collective perspectives can be considered together without conflating them (pp. 49-50).

The third chapter entitled “An enactivist perspective on the interaction between religious rituals and beliefs” (pp. 56-92), analyses the role of the relationship between bodily participation and symbolic meaning in ritual practice. The author provides a brief overview of enactivism and states that her goal was “to introduce several foundational principles determining the relationship between beliefs and ritual” (p. 62). She goes on to establish “Theoretical models of the relationship between the body and symbolic content in the religious ritual” and discusses two main issues: the type of relationship between beliefs and ritual, and the function of rituals – whether for transformation or for preservation. The author also supplements this discussion with four different kinds of balance between symbolism and embodiment, namely:

Body/Symbolic Representation Model Scheme (B/SR-MS): B/SR-M-1: The body as conduit of symbolism; B/SR-M-2: The body as an amplifier of religious beliefs (similar to Tanya Luhrmann's idea); B/SR-M-3: The body as a source of beliefs; B/SR-M-4: The body as the essence of ritual. The author argues that "the first two positions, B/SR-M-1 and B/SR-M-2, are developed within traditional approaches in the cognitive science of religion based on representationalism, while the third (B/SR-M-3) and fourth (B/SR-M-4) are characteristic of the enactivist approach and embodied cognition" (p. 68).

The author then examines all four kinds, and focuses on the last two as her theoretical framework. This is a framework which on one hand, describes the way symbolic representation depends on bodily engagement in ritual practices, and, on the other hand, helps to identify four types of body-symbolic representation relations "arranged according to the function played by the body in the production and transmission of religious beliefs" (p. 66). Thanks to the analyses in this chapter, the author is also able to show how the enactive concept can be applied to explain cases of ritual transfer, particularly demonstrating how ritual practices create a sense of "reality" in religious phenomena. The thesis argues that "in B/SR-M-4, the body itself is the locus of the religious experience rather than merely an instrument for accessing it. In this scenario, the direct bodily experience is the religious reality" (p. 90). It adds that similar analysis in online space "allows us to conclude that the combination of bodily engagement and symbolic interpretation is maintained even in a virtual ritual setting, although it tends to transform in a way that reduces all ritual forms to B/SR-M-1 and B/SR-M-2 types" (p. 91).

Furthermore, in this chapter, the author persuasively demonstrates that (i) the concept of real-making (see: Luhrmann's theory) provides a unified perspective that helps explain the diverse ways in which rituals integrate embodiment and belief; she also argues that (ii) religious practices cannot be reduced to either symbolic interpretation or bodily technique due to the fact that the sense of reality of spiritual objects, characteristic of the religious mind, stems precisely from the fusion of the bodily and the symbolic. Last but not least, the author (iii) identifies possible proportions in this fusion of the bodily and the symbolic according to different B/SR models, while emphasizing that real-making can take different forms depending on the type of ritual.

In her fourth chapter: "The idealizational cognitive model of the relationship between religious ritual and religious beliefs" (pp. 93-127), Shabalina emphasizes that her "approach proposed here is idealizing in character. I will outline a general model of the religious belief system and consider how its components – individual beliefs – relate to religious ritual" (p. 93). Her goal is thus to construct a theoretical framework that can serve as a tool for interpreting and explaining the function of religious beliefs within ritual practice. The proposed model distinguishes three types of beliefs: basic, justificatory, and procedural (Figure 9), which allows for a more precise definition of how specific types of beliefs relate to religious ritual.

Based on the above findings, two theses are being formulated. The first thesis specifies which beliefs play a causative role in initiating a ritual. The second specifies which beliefs emerge as a result of a completed ritual. These dissertation theses are thus the following: (1) Procedural beliefs are directly related to the initiation of a religious ritual; (2) The effect of a completed ritual is the emergence of justificatory and basic beliefs—that is, performing a religious ritual generates both justifying experiential beliefs and core beliefs.

Finally, the theoretical model proposed in the thesis, that is the model of the relationship between ritual and religious beliefs underlines that within the enactivist approach, ritual can be seen as attracting, generating, and reinforcing justificatory and core religious beliefs (Figure 10). This issue is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three of the dissertation, devoted to the

enactivist perspective on ritual, where the author examines how ritual action is closely interlinked with doctrinal religious beliefs. She argues that this relationship may take several forms, including symbolization, amplification, generation, and constitutive embodiment (p. 121). The theoretical model she introduces in the thesis, allows for a much more precise definition of the relationship between (1) and (2) i.e. between religious beliefs and religious ritual. The doctoral thesis concludes that “The innovative aspect of this account lies in distinguishing between the belief in the necessity of ritual action and the rationale for that necessity – a distinction supported by anthropological evidence showing that rational justifications for ritual obligations are often inconsistent or entirely absent” (p. 126).

**General remarks:** The dissertation is presented with great precision, coherence and clarity. The author achieves the intended primary research goal defined as “a reconstruction and critical analysis of existing theoretical models concerning the cognitive foundations of ritual, with a focus on how they account for the role of belief, their contributions to understanding this relationship, and their limitations” (p. 3). This goal is being achieved (among other things) in three steps:

(a) through the skillful application of the principle: *Qui bene distinguit, bene docet*: (four B/SR-M types, three types of beliefs), and then on the innovative analysis of B/SR-M-3, B/SR-M-4 and putting them within the perspective of the enactivist approach and embodied cognition;

(b) through the skillful use, clarification and modification of the distinctions introduced by McCauley & Lawson’s - the author proposes modifying their theory by extending the structure of a religious ritual to include two systems – the concept selection system and the belief selection system - and by further integrating Whitehead’s concept of individual and collective perspectives without conflating them.

(c) through a careful analysis of Lohmann’s theory of the real-making which can now be extended to examine the patterns that theistic and non-theistic religions share in transforming religious ideas into tangible, embodied experiences.

The main and most original contribution of this dissertation to CSR is that it demonstrates that beliefs associated with religious ritual do not constitute a single, uniform category defined solely by metaphysical or counterintuitive content. Instead, these beliefs exist in multiple forms and relate to ritual in diverse ways. To make this point clearer, the dissertation proposes understanding religious beliefs as a heterogeneous system organized into three layers: core beliefs, surrounded by justificatory beliefs, and, finally, by procedural beliefs.

### **A few additional comments**

1. By focusing on the “4E” framework (pp. 56-58), enactivism in CSR provides a more holistic view of religion that integrates bodily movement, social interaction, and environmental context, moving beyond the model of traditional cognitive science. Religious belief is enacted through bodily practices and environmental interaction rather than just through mental representation or computation in the brain. A frequently asked question about enactivism is whether it can adequately explain high-level cognition (e.g. abstract reasoning, self-reflection), high-level beliefs (like e.g. belief in democracy) as well as its potential overemphasis on basic action as a paradigm, presented as superior to existing computational models. Is enactivism powerful enough to account for cognition “through the relationship between body and language” (p. 60), specifically via the two final B/SR-M models?

Or perhaps through the most sophisticated aspects of human thought and higher religious beliefs (cognitively complex beliefs like e.g. doctrinal), or whether it works best only at the level of perception and action? "Higher religious beliefs" means abstract, doctrinal, and conceptually sophisticated religious beliefs, rather than simple emotional or ritual religious experiences. The first problem is that by focusing on "participatory sense-making" and "bodily enactment," enactivism can understate the representational beliefs, the role of propositional, symbolic, and abstract theological belief in driving, shaping, and sustaining ritual activity. It risks ignoring how people often act on the basis of already-held, explicit beliefs. The second problem comes from classic CSR (Lawson, Staal) and from traditional science of religion: e.g. J. G. Frazer assumes that internal mental states—specifically, aberrant beliefs and intellectual misconceptions - give rise to behaviors that manifest as attempts to magically influence reality. Furthermore, the fact that enactivism undermines the role of these internal representations or "endogenous influences", means that the movement may be unable to explain why rituals are performed in the absence of an immediate, tangible environment, or why people change their beliefs independently of environmental stimuli.

The author recognizes this problem and emphasizes: "On the contrary, all B/SR models, to some extent, recognize that ritual action and its accompanying beliefs form a dynamic, mutually reinforcing cycle. The enactive research program, particularly in the context of affordance, demonstrates that ritual meaning does not emerge as an initial causal factor, but rather as the result of a continuous interaction between body, culture, and the surrounding environment" (p. 72). We can say that if rituals and beliefs are in a constant, „dynamic, mutually reinforcing cycle”, "bring-forth-a-world" loop (i.e. how organisms constitute in their own reality through a recursive, sensorimotor, and cultural interaction with the environment), but then – we can conclude that - it is difficult to explain the long-term, stable, and often relentlessly continuous nature of religious traditions.

2. While many scholars of religion emphasize the importance of familiarity (p. 47, 77) and emotional comfort associated with controlling the ritual space (p. 65), fewer among them have explored the basic dynamics of human attention and the role of boredom (tedium) and habituation as limiting factors in ritual enactment. Boredom and habituation reduce attentiveness as a result of the monotony of ritual behaviour. Given the repetitive nature of ritual, ritual frequency must overcome a complex set of limiting factors. While frequent performance is highly desirable for memory consolidation, however boredom is an inevitable side product of high performance frequency, a phenomenon discussed in the psychological literature under the heading of habituation effects (Uttls, Ohta, a.a. eds. 2006, *Memory and Emotion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Oxford). How does the theory proposed by the author relate to the phenomenon of boredom understood in this way?

3. On the one hand, rituals characterized by high frequency and low levels of emotional or physiological arousal exhibit a cognitive advantage under conditions of cultural selection. On the other hand, we have rituals that occur infrequently (pp. 77, 86) but involve intense sensory stimulation and heightened emotional arousal. Would the author agree with the thesis that, according to his theory, both categories act together as attractor states in the cultural evolutionary landscape toward which ritual forms tend, thus generating the bimodal distribution observed in ritual systems across societies?

4. A ritual is, by its very nature, a costly undertaking, and there is little available evidence that it yields the desired results. Does a ritual bring rain, satisfy the desires of ancestors, provide

greater control over chosen enemies, or bring divine blessings upon offspring or marriage? These are questions that must be considered in light of the often exorbitant costs associated with performing rituals. Why do people continue to bear these costs when the results of the ritual are inevitably uncertain?

5. Despite innovations and changes in some ritual sequences, their core—the ideological representations and fundamental practices (e.g., spoken words and gestures)—has remained unchanged throughout history. The question is why this is so. As I understand it, core beliefs are at play here, but what sustains them?

6. As well pain as religious rituals are complex phenomena. Pain is often understood as a subject of the natural sciences, and at the same time pain is defined as a psychological and subjective experience, leaving room for psychology and the humanities. So both are not “just physical” or “just mental/belief”—they’re a mix of all these layers. Rituals, like pain, are influenced by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors, suggesting a bottom-up (starting from the body or brain activity) and top-down (starting from the mind, beliefs or culture) perspectives. Can we say that approaches to the study of pain and religion should interact rather than coexist? Because beliefs can change bodily responses (e.g., placebo effect reducing pain) and bodily states can shape meaning and religious belief (e.g., intense ritual experiences reinforcing faith).

7. We need a preliminary framework for the interdisciplinary study of pain, physical enactment and its treatment within the religious mind (p. 74). Understanding online religious activity (livestreamed services, prayer apps, online communities, social media groups) and the experiences of individuals participating in stressful and painful rituals (physical discomfort fasting, kneeling for long periods, self-denial or emotional intensity, ecstatic practices) requires a methodology that integrates objective measures and subjective assessments (personal experiences like: “I felt closer to deity”) of online religious activity. Cognitive research design for these rituals should incorporate functional imaging technology, physiological measures (ECG, blood pressure), and objective and subjective measures of pain (pain tolerance, questionnaires, and interviews). Furthermore, examining the social, cultural, and historical context of these rituals can play a significant role in understanding them.

8. Shabalina argues: “Rituals present themselves as predefined sequences of actions whose performance is taken to be necessary and socially expected. Satisfying this expectation is an existential obligation for everyone” (p. 105). Even short-lived collective rituals can foster discriminatory attitudes among group members, or even within entire groups, and this bias intensifies with increasing ritual effort and intensity. The question is whether these socially motivated biases appear to be biologically rooted, embodied in the brain's reward systems, where group rituals can lead individuals to support the punishment of religious outgroup members. Research suggests that extravagant rituals - often seen as an indicator of prosocial religions - may function not only as signals of loyalty to the ingroup (e.g. fraternity) but also as signals of hostility and separation from outgroups. Religious rituals may deepen bonds within a group while at the same time intensifying the distinction between insiders and outsiders.

9. The author argues: “This investigation is deliberately limited to rituals performed within religious contexts and does not extend to non-religious forms of ritualized behaviour, such as secular ceremonies, rituals in sports, politics, education, or ritualized behaviour in animals” (p.

3). However, we can try to extend these analyses and research to rituals that are considered secular and yet somehow related to religious ones. Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) was one of the most prominent twentieth-century theatre innovators who viewed theatre as a sacred space and developed an acting process based on reducing everything to its essential elements (D. Kosiński, *Grotowski and Performance Studies*, ANTROPOLOGIA E TEATRO – RIVISTA DI STUDI | N. 17 (2024), pp. 1-14). In response to the theater of his time, known as "rich theatre," in which lighting, costumes, and sound effects were maximized, Grotowski promoted a "poor theatre," in which all artificiality was eschewed. The actors in his theatre worked hard on the script and language embodiment. Their exercises aimed to dissolve the split between thinking and doing. Movements, voice, and emotions were trained together. Actors reacted with their entire bodies, not just intellectually, in line with the principle: The body thinks, and the mind is embodied. Their body became a fully expressive instrument. They rehearsed their monologues continuously in an act of repetition, akin to ritualized prayer. (Grotowski, J., & Barba, E. (1968). *Towards a poor theatre*. Routledge). These procedures required a lot of empathy, sensitivity, and courage, as well as the elements that accompanied each expression. An actor involved in Grotowski's theatre was called a "sacred actor" because his work as an actor was considered a personal sacrifice. (Grotowski & Barba, 1968). It's clear that one of the most important themes inherent in Grotowski's work is ritual. He sought to achieve sincere communication and participation between actor and audience during public performances. It could be said that Grotowski's long-cherished aim was to use theatrical performances, such as ritual ceremonies, to forge a new relationship between actor and spectator and thereby address and critique the dilemmas of Western culture. He remained true to his principles throughout his lifetime; he was not concerned with imitating the ceremony of ritual or religion, but with the effect and spirit of ritual itself. He warned against thoughtless imitation of ritual ceremony. However, Grotowski experienced the limitations of public performance, which prevented the achievement of sincere communication and participation between actor and spectator: "I do not think that the crisis in the theatre can be separated from certain other crises in contemporary culture. One of the essential elements — namely the disappearance of the sacred and of its ritual function in the theatre - is a result of the obvious and probably inevitable decline of religion. What we are talking about is the possibility of creating a secular sacrum in the theatre" (*Towards A Poor Theatre*, p. 49).

In the light of the above a number of questions arise: Can Grotowski's understanding of the actor's body and the pursuit of some sort of "spiritual goal" through ritualized exercises be compared to the enactive concept of religion and its understanding of embodied ritual in the cognitive science of religion? How far Grotowski's "poor theatre" can be understood as a laboratory of embodied ritual that converges with enactive theories of religion in its emphasis on the body, practice, and transformation? These rituals will certainly not be counted among "the first type of B/SR-M" which are also „highly characteristic of secular rituals" (p. 72), and to a certain extent they will fall into type 3 or 4. Rituals in Grotowski's theatre, however, differ from religious one in that they lack shared belief structures, experimental instability, and they focus on individuals rather than on collectives.

## Conclusions

The above comments (1–9) in no way diminish the scientific value of the dissertation under review, rather, they constitute a form of academic discussion on the highly complex and long-debated issue of the relationship between religious ritual and religious beliefs (see above, general remarks). I hold the present doctoral dissertation „The question of the relationship between religious ritual and religious beliefs in the cognitive science of religion", which was

submitted to me for review, in very high regard. It is a thoroughly argued study which puts forward an original solution to a significant scientific problem. The methods employed in the research are appropriate for the scientific objectives set. The work is valuable, interesting, of a great academic rigorous, and deserves distinction (wyróżnienie) and should be published. The author is exceptionally well prepared for independent scholarly work. Her erudition has allowed the multifaceted and complex problems of the cognitive science of religion to be analyzed critically and clearly, in academic English. The doctoral candidate has demonstrated excellent knowledge of the scholarly literature on the subject, with over 300 references cited in the thesis (pp. 132–154).

I am pleased to state that the reviewed dissertation fully meets the requirements specified in Article 187 of the Act of July 20, 2018, on Higher Education and Science (określone w art. 187 Ustawy z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce). On this basis, I submit to the relevant authorities of the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism (Wydział Nauk Politycznych i Dziennikarstwa) a request to admit Ms. Anastasiia Shabalina to the subsequent stages of the procedure for the award of the doctoral degree in the field of journalism and mass communication.



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