

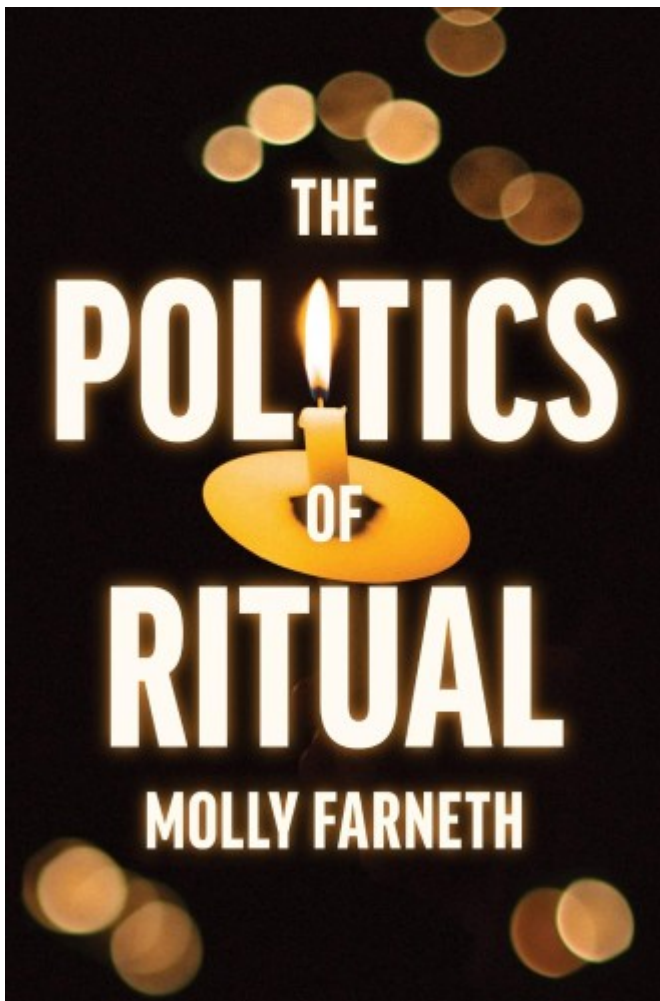
The rituals we need

Religion scholar Molly Farneth shows how rituals—both civic and religious—change us and the societies we live in.

by [Emily Soloff](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue

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In Review



The Politics of Ritual

By Molly Farneth

Princeton University Press

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Our lives are redolent with rituals, from personal to promulgated, from silly to serious, from religious to civic and secular. In *The Politics of Ritual*, Molly Farneth casts a determined eye on the what, how, and why of rituals, demonstrating that they are important and perilous, encumbering and malleable. The professor of religion at Haverford College sees in American life a yearning for rituals—shared routines that are meaningful and significant and that have the power to create, sustain, and transform social and political worlds.

Rituals are engines of social cohesion which can bring people together for collective action. They are social practices which define who is included or excluded, who has power and who has none. Rituals mark and enact boundaries. They can dominate, exclude, and exploit—and they can uplift, include, and promote. Rituals are political in that they help to maintain community and can bring about communal reform. Or they can reinforce authoritarian regimes, distribute power unequally, and produce behaviors at odds with democratic ideals.

“The significance of civic ritual is best understood in light of theories and histories of religion,” writes Farneth. She examines theoretical and philosophical approaches to understanding how rituals—both civic and religious—evolve and how enacting them changes us and the societies we live in.

Farneth draws on ritual theory, social practice theory, and philosophy of language and introduces readers to other scholars in these fields through generous footnotes. She makes the case for recognizing and strengthening an innovative and democratic ritual life to “create and sustain communities that are more just, inclusive, and participatory.” By understanding how rituals function, adherents can enact changes to bring about more inclusive communities, she writes.

While *innovative* and *democratic* are two words that may not spring quickly to mind in relation to religious ritual, Farneth offers examples of how believers challenge rituals that are unjust and bring about change. Justice requires standing against existing social structures and power centers that are biased, she notes, including those that reinforce a discriminatory status quo. Drawing on historical precedents, Farneth shows how adherents can contest and successfully change even the most sacred rituals. She sees in the 1974 ordination of 11 women as priests in the Episcopal Church—two years before the House of Bishops accepted such

elevation—an example of how highlighting the exclusionary nature of the church’s male-only ordination demonstrated an injustice in church governance and hastened the decision to ordain women as Episcopal priests.

Farneth describes the use of religious rituals in civic spaces specifically to bring about political change. Examples include clergy candlelight vigils against war, eucharistic services at border walls, and the chanting of the Jewish mourners’ prayer for Black Americans killed by police. “Rituals can bind groups or reconfigure them,” she writes. She notes how public mourning rituals for COVID victims resembled the protests and mourning for AIDS victims decades earlier. In both cases, the rituals protested public policies that exacerbated inequity in health care.

Ritual is where people recognize the social standing of others and distribute social goods, Farneth says. The struggle for social, legal, and religious recognition of same-sex marriage “played an important role in enacting a new set of gender and sexual norms” in the United States, she writes.

The Politics of Ritual is a compact and serious academic work. With ten pages of bibliography and extensive footnotes, Farneth offers readers a wide-ranging survey of contemporary thinking on social theory and the nature and history of rituals—all in just over 200 pages. She quotes thinkers from Aristotle to Émile Durkheim on the role of ritual in creating and maintaining social cohesion and solidarity. “The repeated enactment of a ritual can be part of a process of ethical formation,” she notes.

At a time when American associational life is declining, formal membership in religious institutions has fallen dramatically, and individuals choose more often to act alone than in groups, rituals “may nevertheless help form civic virtue and enact democratic possibilities,” Farneth writes. She concludes her study by urging readers to create the kind of rituals that are coalitional and intersectional, that distribute the goods of society justly, that recognize legitimate authority, and above all that can create decent and courageous people. Amen to that.