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# The monster and the critics: a ritual reply<sup>1</sup>

PHILIPPE BUC

*Dangers of Rituals* and related articles<sup>2</sup> had three principal aims. The first was to reconstruct the anthropology native to the European Middle Ages. How did authors (and so perhaps social agents), understand practices that modern historians now label 'rituals'? And what, according to authors (and so perhaps agents), did these practices effect or seek to effect in society? The second was to analyse the social and literary logic of the documents containing depictions of, or allusions to these so-called 'rituals'. Texts and their authors, in different ways, but just as much as people who engaged in symbolic action, were active forces in political culture. The book reconstructs these strategies of the quill, and contrasts them with modern historians' reconstructions of the place of 'ritual' in medieval political culture. A third aim was to trace how the concept of ritual now used by medievalists formed itself; and to assess this use in the light of that genealogy. The target was not anthropology (whose recent turns I am well aware of), but its reception by historians of the Middle Ages. In dealing with all these issues, I could not avoid using 'ritual' or quasi synonyms. I had to employ such terms to engage existing historiography, and to show that the practices it discusses oftentimes worked differently than many colleagues suppose. Friedrich Nietzsche famously problematized the issue: Can one argue against a dominant epistemology without employing its terminology?<sup>3</sup> How else, for instance,

<sup>1</sup> To some reviews of Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Buc, 'Political Ritual: Medieval and Modern Interpretations', in Hans-Werner Goetz (ed.), *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters* (Bochum, 2000), pp. 255–72; 'Ritual and Interpretation: The Early Medieval Case', *Early Medieval Europe* 9:2 (2000), pp. 1–28; 'Rituel politique et imaginaire politique', *Revue historique* 305:4 (2001), pp. 843–83.

<sup>3</sup> So Geoffrey Koziol, 'The Dangers of Polemic: Is Ritual Still an Interesting Topic of Historical Study?', *Early Medieval Europe* 11:4 (2002), pp. 367–88, at pp. 375–6. I explain why I must do so in *Dangers*, e.g., pp. 5, 176–7, 179. That I sometimes see that *certain* symbolic practices work in the same way as they do for some colleagues cannot be held against me either. One cannot differ on every point from one's peers and predecessors.

1 can one show the importance, in contrast to the ‘performance’ of any  
 2 ‘ritual’, of written (and hypothetically existent lost oral) reports about  
 3 this same ‘ritual’?<sup>4</sup>

4 It was difficult to make these arguments without bluntness. It was  
 5 even undesirable: a radical *Stellungnahme* serves methodological clarity  
 6 better than a more cautious, eirenic position, which often muddles the  
 7 issues.<sup>5</sup> *Dangers* advised avoiding the concept, and even the term, of  
 8 ritual. Is this nihilistic ‘arch-nominalism’? Granted, scholars cannot  
 9 explain much without having recourse to concepts such as ‘class’, ‘culture’,  
 10 ‘institutions’, ‘religion’, or ‘society’.<sup>6</sup> As just said, this holds true even  
 11 for any deconstruction. But in reconstructions of the past some concepts  
 12 yield more than others. And even the more fruitful among these instru-  
 13 ments have to be used with caution and with full understanding of their  
 14 ontological status, epistemological claims, and heuristic potential. When  
 15 one employs any concept of ‘society’, for example, one has to establish  
 16 in what sense a human ensemble is coherent enough to be categorized  
 17 as such. In some places and times, ‘society’ is a problematic unit. Fredrik  
 18 Barth has shown how, in the Pathans’s case, translocal trading networks  
 19 constitute, for merchants, the relevant social groupings, which do not  
 20 correspond, spatially or otherwise, to other groupings (aristocratic or  
 21 peasant).<sup>7</sup> It was not out of pure fancy that Georg Simmel felt it necessary  
 22 to elucidate ‘how is society possible’.<sup>8</sup> Nor was it to trigger migraines that  
 23 Niklas Luhmann tried to define what makes a social system a society,  
 24 as opposed to a mere system of interaction.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when reflective  
 25 historians make conceptual claims involving ‘religion’, ‘nation’, ‘church’  
 26 or ‘society’, they do so, indeed, in ways broader than medieval agents  
 27 might have. But they do so reluctantly and with in-depth cognition of  
 28 the medieval lexica and semantic fields, the history of the words they  
 29

30 <sup>4</sup> Koziol’s conflation of two registers (native conceptions and social scientific concepts) leads  
 31 him to perceive inconsistencies in my work (‘Dangers’, pp. 375–6). But if the late Roman  
 32 record explicitly states that consensus at the games is a test of civic strength, I am quite  
 33 allowed to take this as a departure point for an analysis of authorial strategies in depictions  
 34 of the games. That the late antique belief dovetails here with modern functionalism’s own  
 35 conviction that ritual creates order is unproblematic for this specific analysis. In the pursuit  
 36 of textual strategies, I can well state that ‘sadness’ was a political signal since this is what  
 37 ninth-century authors, on the basis of Herod’s faked mourning for John the Baptist, themselves  
 38 understood.

39 <sup>5</sup> As understood by Janet Nelson; see her review, *Speculum* 78:3 (2003), pp. 847–50; and *eadem*,  
 40 ‘England and the Continent in the Ninth Century, III’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical*  
 41 *Society*, 6th ser. 14 (2004), pp. 1–24, at p. 23. See also Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern*  
 42 *Europe*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 8–9.

43 <sup>6</sup> So Koziol, ‘Dangers’, p. 375.

<sup>7</sup> Fredrik Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (London, 1959). See his critique of  
 41 mainstream concepts of society, ‘Towards Greater Naturalism in Conceptualizing Societies’,  
 42 in Adam Kuper (ed.), *Conceptualizing Society* (London, 1992), pp. 17–33.

<sup>8</sup> Georg Simmel, ‘Wie ist Gesellschaft möglich’, in his *Soziologie* (Berlin, 1908), pp. 21–31.

<sup>9</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz (Stanford, 1995).

1 use, and their limits.<sup>10</sup> ‘Ritual’ – if medievalists still want to use it –  
2 necessitates the same caution.

3 While the position taken, then, was more trenchant than professional  
4 courtesies too often call for,<sup>11</sup> I still stand by its core. We should take  
5 stock of the existence, between medieval conceptions and modern  
6 concepts, of important continuities but also of severe discontinuities.  
7 The very same genealogy that gives us a chance to shuttle, on the paths  
8 of understanding (*Verstehen*), between medieval and contemporary also  
9 produces *faux amis*.<sup>12</sup> More optimistic scholars have reminded me that  
10 the combination of continuum and mutations is the very precondition  
11 for the fashioning of fine-tuned cognitive tools: having been produced  
12 in continuity with the past, but endowed with more sharpness than  
13 past thinkers’ conceptions, these newer instruments allow for refined  
14 explanations.<sup>13</sup> Indeed – but this has been the recognized claim of  
15 historical hermeneutics since the nineteenth century, so precisely the  
16 approach that I wanted to stand on its head. Hermeneutics may  
17 illuminate; they also project blinding shadows on critical dimensions of  
18 the past.<sup>14</sup> ‘Cultural translation’ – the understanding of contemporary non-  
19 western cultures with the help of an (initially) European conceptual grid  
20 – is not easy; it stands some chance of success only if methodologically  
21 transparent. The same obtains in dealings with the pre-modern European  
22 past. Only by combining a thorough and historicized knowledge of the  
23 social-scientific tradition with an equally thorough knowledge both of  
24 the medieval sources and of the conceptions that inform them, will the  
25 historian (not necessarily this one) explain medieval symbolic practices  
26 in a way that is not simply descriptive *and* in a manner that does not  
27 distort medieval political culture.

28 ‘Political rituals’ were systemically targets and occasions for violence  
29 and distortions – actual or textual. In foregrounding this, I steered  
30 uncomfortably close to a *Realpolitik* tone. Geoffrey Koziol is not off the  
31 mark, then, when he comments that ‘though one part of his [Buc’s]  
32 argument asks us to take the religion of these people seriously, another  
33 sees rituals (including rituals of religion) as nothing but a set of rhetorical  
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37 <sup>10</sup> For ‘religion’, see John Bossy, ‘Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim’, *Past and Present* 95  
38 (1982), pp. 3–18, with Peter Biller, ‘Words and the Medieval Notion of Religion’, *Journal of*  
39 *Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), pp. 351–69.

40 <sup>11</sup> See Koziol, ‘Dangers’.

41 <sup>12</sup> This is why, in the inverse move, Gavin Langmuir argues that the modern scholar cannot  
42 begin from native ‘descriptions’, and that modern explanatory models should avoid contam-  
43 ination through past beliefs. See his *History, Religion and Antisemitism* (Berkeley, 1990).

44 <sup>13</sup> David Nirenberg, personal e-mail (May 2002); Alexandra Walsham, ‘Review Article: The  
Dangers of Ritual’, *Past and Present* 180 (2003), pp. 277–87, at p. 285.

<sup>14</sup> As argued in *Dangers*, p. 5.

1 tropes that cover a writer's partisan loyalties'.<sup>15</sup> This legitimate critique  
 2 reveals how, in this book at least,<sup>16</sup> I did not underscore systematically  
 3 enough how awfully earnest authors were when they waged their trust  
 4 in groups or rulers. Let me now seize the opportunity, and tentatively  
 5 suggest how I would locate the field of early medieval 'belief' in relation  
 6 to my colleagues' 'rituals'.

7 One solution, radically epitomized in a recent book, would be to  
 8 evacuate power from religion. Arguing that historiography has interpreted  
 9 in too political a light Ottonian and Salian royalty's participation in the  
 10 liturgy, Ludger Körntgen re-situates it in the dimension of personal,  
 11 private piety.<sup>17</sup> While refreshing, this thesis leads to too sharp a divorce  
 12 between religion and power; between a king's personal salvation and  
 13 the common religious good; and between demonstrative expressions  
 14 of royal piety and the king's ministry and governance. This is not the  
 15 road that either Koziol or myself would take. One has to allow for a  
 16 more complex configuration of agency and conviction. The medieval  
 17 configuration allowed room for propaganda, because authors and actors  
 18 thought they served some *bonum commune*. Sincerity and partisanship  
 19 often went hand in hand. Gregory of Tours, for instance, probably  
 20 truly believed that only exceptionally could a king lead the *ecclesia*.  
 21 Hence he denied liturgical status to king-centred para-liturgical practices  
 22 that had potentially the same valence as episcopal liturgy.<sup>18</sup> Liudprand  
 23 of Cremona genuinely trusted in King Otto's sanctity and in Berengar  
 24 II's damnation. But earlier in his life, he had probably considered that  
 25 Berengar was a god-chosen king; later circumstances led him to revisit  
 26 this position (and correlatedly re-evaluate Berengar's relationship to the  
 27 liturgy). Here is belief of a sort we moderns might still recognize. But  
 28 belief could go hand in hand with agency and even manipulation. If  
 29 pious monks might forge charters and spin imaginative house histories,  
 30 partisan authors – partisan since the quest for the common good always  
 31 generates factions – felt it was their duty to besmirch enemies' rituals.  
 32 In this sense the end justified the means. Native hermeneutic could  
 33 account for instrumental action and yet assume the operation of divine  
 34

35 <sup>15</sup> Koziol, 'Dangers', p. 382. By contrast, he surely goes too far when, elsewhere, he makes me  
 36 the representative of the 'cynical view' of ritual, who refuses that 'people in the early Middle  
 37 Ages believed anything or stood for anything'. See his 'A Father, a Son, Memory, and Hope',  
 38 in Jürgen Martschukat and Steffen Patzold (eds), *Geschichtswissenschaft und Performative*  
 39 *Turn* (Cologne, 2003), pp. 83–103, nn. 6 and 9.

40 <sup>16</sup> See the conclusion to Buc, 'Rituel politique', pp. 881–3.

41 <sup>17</sup> Ludger Körntgen, *Königsherrschaft und Gottes Gnade. Zu Kontext und Funktion sakraler*  
 42 *Vorstellungen in Historiographie und Bildzeugnissen der ottonisch-frühsalischen Zeit* (Berlin,  
 43 2001).

44 <sup>18</sup> So, *pace* Koziol, 'Dangers', pp. 375–6, I am not inventing new 'rituals', but recovering a fuller  
 45 field of Merovingian symbolic practices in order to show how and why partisan penmanship  
 46 obscured some and highlighted others.

1 providence. God's will manifested itself through the dense presence of  
 2 scriptural exemplarity; exemplarity connected to human agency through  
 3 the signs of sincere conversion – the signs of the digestion and assimilation  
 4 of these exemplars into the human subject.

5 Two examples. The first is Carolingian. In 833, Archbishop Agobard  
 6 reminded Louis the Pious how, sixteen years earlier, in order to select  
 7 a co-emperor and successor, this selfsame Louis had ordered a number  
 8 of liturgical observances. The emperor had provided for a three-day  
 9 fast, masses, and the universal giving of extraordinary alms 'so that  
 10 Almighty God . . . would pour His will into your [the emperor's]  
 11 heart'. The archbishop added: 'You performed everything that had to  
 12 be done in such a matter, with the faith and hope (*tali fide et spe*) that  
 13 no one would doubt that this [your decision] had been poured into you  
 14 and inspired to you by God.'<sup>19</sup> The liturgical techniques employed to  
 15 secure inspiration from God were simultaneously the means used to  
 16 convince the public that this inspiration verily came from God. Agobard,  
 17 who agreed with Louis' choice, did not view this process as mere propa-  
 18 ganda. But propaganda – *propaganda fidei* – it was as well.

19 A second example. In 1024, at Kamba, German bishops and lay  
 20 aristocrats convened to elect a new king. Emperor Henry II had died  
 21 without heirs, and so disorder threatened the *regnum*. I follow Wipo's  
 22 account step by step, in order to articulate as finely as possible his  
 23 understanding. Preliminary exchanges of letters had prepared the dis-  
 24 cussions; in Kamba proper, they were extremely intense, yet ultimately  
 25 succeeded in narrowing the pool to two relatives, both called Conrad.  
 26 At this stage, each elector dissimulated his opinion, fearing conflict  
 27 between the finalists. The Conrads discussed in private the conditions  
 28 for the one to agree to the election of the other. Finally, the elder  
 29 Conrad kissed his younger namesake. This was a signal, *indicium*, that  
 30 a heartfelt agreement (*concordia*) had been found: 'All the great sat  
 31 down, and the people gathered, standing, around them.' In hierarchical  
 32 order, each man publicly expressed the choice that he had long kept  
 33 veiled and hidden in his heart (*quisque diu velatum corde tegebat*). It was  
 34 a moment of revelation. For Wipo, it was precisely the intensity of this  
 35 jockeying that signalled, once consensus was reached, that the man so  
 36 consensually chosen was actually not the elect of men, but of God.<sup>20</sup>  
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38 <sup>19</sup> Agobard, *Flebilis epistola*, PL 104, col. 289d.

39 <sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval*  
 40 *France* (Ithaca, 1992), p. 314, and cf. Lothar Bornscheuer, *Miseriae regum*, *Arbeiten zur*  
 41 *Frühmittelalterforschung* 4 (Berlin, 1968), pp. 192–3, with Wipo, *Gesta Chuonradi* 1–2, ed.  
 42 Harry Bresslau, *MGH SRG* 61 (Hanover, 1915), pp. 13–9. The marks of God's action appear  
 43 in the archbishop's demeanour (*abundanti corde, hilari vultu*), and similarly in Conrad after  
 his anointing and the merciful deeds he performs then (*alacri vultu, honesto incessu*); see *Gesta*  
*Chuonradi* 3, p. 24.

1 One is faced here with two complementary dimensions in a single  
2 liturgical event. First, 'political' processes that one would, with Gerd  
3 Althoff, be tempted to read through a symbolic interactionist prism.  
4 Second, the presence of a holiness that will be integrated into Conrad's  
5 persona<sup>21</sup> after the end of the coronation and anointing. Wipo chose to  
6 believe in the simultaneous presence of these two dimensions.

7 While shying away from modern rational choice theory, I am speaking  
8 of 'choice' because conjunction was not the only alternative. The avail-  
9 ability of the dualistic outlook meant that medieval observers and  
10 participants genuinely wondered whether any given symbolic action  
11 referred to the profane or to the sacred.<sup>22</sup> Probably neither the Kamba  
12 election nor Louis' 817 decisions were spared such principled worries.  
13 After all, the emperor had ordered religious observances also 'in the  
14 faith and hope' that no one might doubt divine inspiration. The  
15 availability, alongside the Platonic strand in political culture,<sup>23</sup> of the idea  
16 that signifying figure might be completely disjoined from any signified  
17 reality, fostered systematic hesitations. Augustine had underlined the  
18 existence of mendacious signs. Sources associated with both clergy and  
19 lay nobility show that both orders systematically feared hypocrisy. This  
20 too belongs in medieval 'belief'.  
21

22 Did *Dangers* focus too much on functionalism? I had tried to evaluate  
23 the validity for the Middle Ages of Walter Burkert's blunt methodological  
24 self-justification: 'Functionalism coincides with the self-interpretation  
25 of traditional religions'.<sup>24</sup> I trust I showed the epistemological problems  
26 inherent in this idea. I may have failed to execute the same operation  
27 for other strands of the social sciences medievalists employ.<sup>25</sup> This has  
28 opened the door for yet other critiques. They too afford a chance for  
29 clarification and, possibly, advances. Alexandra Walsham considers  
30 that I too quickly dismissed the contribution of the radical Protestant  
31 tradition to the concept's genesis.<sup>26</sup> Scholarly consensus has it that  
32 Calvinist and related radical eucharistic ideas played the key role in the  
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37 <sup>21</sup> But never definitively, as Körntgen, *Königsherrschaft*, rightly cautions.

38 <sup>22</sup> See Buc, 'Rituel politique', pp. 881–3, for the textual traces of one such hesitation.

39 <sup>23</sup> Koziol, *Begging*, p. 322, in consonance with his general argument, foregrounds this dimen-  
40 sion. But theology, and consequently the contribution of theology to the workings of ritual,  
41 does not limit itself to this Platonic strand.

42 <sup>24</sup> Walter Burkert, 'The Problem of Ritual Killing', in Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Violent*  
43 *Origins* (Stanford, 1987), pp. 149–88, at pp. 155–7.

44 <sup>25</sup> As reviewers have suggested, another agenda would be to work out the genealogy of Pierre  
45 Bourdieu's sociology.

46 <sup>26</sup> Walsham, 'Review', p. 286.

1 formation of modern conceptions of ritual.<sup>27</sup> I highlighted another process:  
 2 the sixteenth-century Catholic and moderate Protestant reclassifications  
 3 of the sacraments led learned elites to foreground the socio-political  
 4 function of religious symbolic practices. The denial of 'real presence'  
 5 came into play only later, and had a different impact on political theory.

6 This was what my reconstruction had to contribute: the role of  
 7 Catholic and conservative Protestant milieus – as opposed to Calvinist  
 8 (or Jewish) culture – in linking proto-functionalism (and paleo-Marxism)  
 9 with religious rites. The conceptualization of ritual was a pan-confessional  
 10 enterprise, spearheaded by these mainline churches. Strikingly, between  
 11 c.1700 and c.1900, thinkers belonging to all confessions converged towards  
 12 the idea that the social group and the religious rite are isomorphous.  
 13 Robertson Smith was a Calvinist who still thought that his own con-  
 14 temporary church needed liturgical reform; for him, a church was a  
 15 'fellowship of worship'. Jurieu and Benjamin Constant came from  
 16 Calvinism as well.<sup>28</sup> Rousseau, who theorized the need of cult for  
 17 civic religion, initially came from reformed Geneva. Durkheim may  
 18 have been ethnically Jewish, but his categories are straightforwardly  
 19 neo-Catholic (arguably, the ambient intellectual culture and the milieu  
 20 of the *École Normale* weighed more than his family background).<sup>29</sup>

21 Furthermore, if one seeks ancestors to Geertzian-style semiotics, they  
 22 are not exclusively radical Protestant, either. The Catholic liturgicist  
 23 Edmond Martène and the moderate Protestant Phillip Melanchthon  
 24 converged in anticipating the 'ritual as text' approach: rites are like  
 25 images and so to be read; rites are pictures of the Word.<sup>30</sup> The French  
 26 *Encyclopédie* took the same position, citing Gregory the Great's famous  
 27 dictum that images are books for the illiterate; so did, a century later,  
 28 Hippolyte Taine, mentioning almost as a commonplace that rites,  
 29 legends, and ceremonies present ideas in pictures.<sup>31</sup>

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 33 <sup>27</sup> Walsham, 'Review', pp. 283–4, 286; Koziol, 'Dangers', p. 374 n. 24. See, however, the important  
 34 corrective in Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, 'Knien vor Gott – Knien vor dem Kaiser. Zum  
 35 Ritualwandel im Konfessionskonflikt', in Gerd Althoff (ed.), *Zeichen – Rituale – Werte* (Münster,  
 2004), pp. 94–100, at pp. 81–109.

36 <sup>28</sup> Buc, *Dangers*, pp. 258–9.

37 <sup>29</sup> Admittedly, I should have spent more time with this strand which links early modern,  
 38 modern, and postmodern thought, and should have flagged explicitly when I was engaging  
 39 it. I did not engage the semiotic Geertz because the definitive deconstruction has been done  
 40 by Talal Asad, 'Discipline and Humility in Christian Monasticism' and 'Towards a Genealogy  
 41 of the Concept of Ritual', repr. in his *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 125–67  
 42 and 55–79. See also Giovanni Levi, 'I pericoli del Geertzismo', *Quaderni Storici* 58 (1985),  
 43 pp. 269–77. Cf. Buc, *Dangers*, p. 3 n. 7, and pp. 170–1 with nn. 20–21, cursorily building on  
 42 Asad for the connections between the Reformed tradition and Geertz.

30 Buc, *Dangers*, pp. 169–71.

31 Buc, *Dangers*, pp. 204, 216. Taine received an intensely Catholic upbringing.

1 For Alexandra Walsham, the downplaying of this strand of semiotics  
 2 comes with contradictions. As she sees it, I reject a functionalist explana-  
 3 tion of medieval rituals because functionalism formed itself during  
 4 the early modern and modern eras. Yet – so Walsham – I unwittingly use  
 5 Geertzian-style models to analyse medieval symbolic practices – an  
 6 inconsistency since these semiotics formed themselves, like functionalism,  
 7 during the early modern and modern eras. Am I then hung on my own  
 8 tie? No, insofar as I did not embrace Geertz's semiotics, neither the  
 9 famous assimilation of rituals to texts, nor the postulate of a high degree  
 10 of transparency in symbols (especially rituals), which enables the social  
 11 scientist to 'read' a culture straightforwardly.<sup>32</sup> I have, first of all, under-  
 12 lined the obvious – that historians know rituals only through texts. And  
 13 the texts medievalists deal with are real texts; they are not – unlike in  
 14 the Geertzian formula – metaphorical. Second, I pointed out how texts  
 15 *qua* texts played a role in the workings of power. As interpretations of  
 16 a ritual, they conditioned its potential effects. Third, in attributing  
 17 efficiency to texts, I did not unwittingly create a 'functionalism of texts'  
 18 that replaces the functionalism of rituals.<sup>33</sup> To state so is to confuse  
 19 intentionalism (or instrumentalism) with functionalism. The former  
 20 posits conscious and wilful individual agency; the latter assumes that  
 21 without reflexivity the social body generates the organs, here rituals,  
 22 necessary for its survival and stability.<sup>34</sup> (If anything, as Koziol suggests,  
 23 my depiction of textual strategies sails uncomfortably close to this  
 24 instrumentalist, sometimes 'cynical', Marxist understanding of religious  
 25 ritual, whose genealogy *Dangers* also traces back from Augustine onward).  
 26 Fourth, far from utilizing Geertzian semiotics, I propose the obvious:  
 27 to look at our texts as medieval texts, at our documents' textuality as  
 28 medieval textuality – and in particular to take seriously the relationship  
 29 between letter and spirit, crucial to medieval modes of interpretation.  
 30 Unlike some anthropological schools and their followers among historians,  
 31 medieval hermeneutics neither assume easy deciphering, nor do they trust  
 32 all signs. Unlike the Geertzian anthropologist, the medieval observer  
 33 expected opacity and potential lies.

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 37 <sup>32</sup> Buc, *Dangers*, pp. 253–4.

38 <sup>33</sup> Walsham, 'Review', p. 285: 'The very functionalism he eschews in regard to assessments of  
 39 social practice is unwittingly transferred to the realm of text'; dovetailing almost to the word  
 40 with Spiegel, 'Review', *American Historical Review* 108:1 (2003), pp. 148–9, here p. 149: 'Buc  
 41 is transferring to textuality the very functionalism that he denies to practice, albeit of a  
 42 different nature.' Cf. also Steffen Patzold, *Das Mittelalter. Perspektiven mediaevistischer*  
 43 *Forschung* 8:1 (2003), p. 172: 'Fraglich ist auch, ob Buc nicht eben jene funktionalistische Sicht  
 . . . auf der Ebene der Textanalyse selbst wiederholt.'

<sup>34</sup> For one version of this hardly minor distinction, see Saul Friedländer, 'Introduction' to  
 Gerald Fleming, *Hitler and the Final Solution* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. ix–x.

1 To demonstrate the gap between such semiotics and medieval  
 2 conceptions, I should have emphasized a second aspect of the latter.  
 3 They assume the transformative efficiency of a biblical exemplar whenever  
 4 a pious Christian understands it, and lives it, according to the spirit.  
 5 Here Körntgen's focus is extremely helpful. It reminds us of the power  
 6 to convert attributed to both the liturgy and symbolic practices that  
 7 mobilized biblical exemplars.

8 A final ground for having underexposed the ancestry of Geertzian  
 9 semiotics lies in my appreciation of the scholarship produced twenty  
 10 years ago, and of its impact. And here I will not be convinced by my  
 11 critics. Medievalists are still often enough influenced by western  
 12 intellectual history's proto-functionalist and paleo-marxist baggage.<sup>35</sup> They  
 13 were certainly so in the early 1980s – not so long ago given our discipline's  
 14 lifespan.<sup>36</sup> I cite Koziol, a keen observer of current historiography,  
 15 surveying in his 1982 Ph.D. dissertation recent crops in his chosen field,  
 16 fertilized by the nitrates of ritual and gift-exchange theories:

17  
 18 Georges Duby and Lester Little . . . have argued that we cannot  
 19 understand the economy of the first feudal age solely in commercial  
 20 terms; and so they have instead emphasized the importance of  
 21 gift-giving as a force of political and social cohesion. Stephen White  
 22 and Aron Gurevic have used the same concept to argue that even in  
 23 the later middle ages property transactions were not simply economic  
 24 affairs, but also means by which family alliances received public  
 25 expression. Lester Little and Patrick Geary have shown that sacred  
 26 relics and monastic maledictions could be effective instruments of  
 27 social control in the absence of institutionalized force.<sup>37</sup>

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 30 <sup>35</sup> An example from the collective volume reviewed in Koziol, 'Dangers': Jos Bazelmans,  
 31 'Beyond Power: Ceremonial Exchanges in *Beowulf*', in Janet L. Nelson and Frans Theuvs  
 32 (eds), *Rituals of Power* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 311–75. Cf. my differing reviews of these articles  
 33 in *Annales, Histoire, Science, Sociales* 58:6 (2003), pp. 1374–8, underlining functionalist com-  
 34 ponents in some. Rob Meens, 'Rituelen in de Middeleeuwen', *Millennium: Tijdschrift voor*  
 35 *middeleeuwse studies* 16 (2002), pp. 134–45, at pp. 135–6, lists some recent functionalist Dutch  
 36 and British studies. Others are reviewed in Buc, 'Political Ritual'; a review essay on David  
 37 Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, *Annales HSS* 53:6 (1998), pp. 1243–1249, criticizes this  
 38 author's reliance on the (very functionalist) René Girard. Other works with functionalist  
 39 overtones are Peter Brown, 'Vers la naissance du purgatoire', *Annales HS* 52:6 (1997),  
 40 pp. 1247–61; Sergio Bertelli, *Il Corpo del Re* (Ponte alle grazie, 1990), English trans. as *The*  
 41 *King's Body: Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (University Park,  
 42 PA, 2001); Éric Palazzo, *Liturgie et société au Moyen Age* (Paris, 2000); and (self-professedly  
 43 Durkheimian) Cyril Petkov, *The Kiss of Peace* (Leiden, 2002). As for my discussion of  
 44 *Repräsentation*, it did not target Gerd Althoff, but a prolific strand in German *Mediaevistik*.

45 <sup>36</sup> Cf. beyond medieval history William Sewell's opinion, 'Geertz, Cultural Systems, and  
 46 History: From Synchrony to Transformation', in *Representations* 55 (1997), pp. 35–55, at p. 46.

47 <sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Koziol, 'Law, Lordship, and Ritual: Political Order in the Diocese of Noyon (1000–  
 48 1150)', Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University (1982), p. 23, who did not here envisage  
 49 historiography much differently than Buc, 'Political Ritual'.

1 In this almost stateless world, rituals of petition ‘expressed acceptance  
 2 of the established distribution of power’. Unlike *Festkrönungen*, they  
 3 were frequent enough ‘to provide the constant public reinforcement of  
 4 the distribution of power that a decentralized political order required’.<sup>38</sup>  
 5 Such was still Koziol’s position (but far from his only focus) ten years  
 6 later when he analysed the peacemaking liturgies of Saint Ursmar.<sup>39</sup>  
 7 Granted, this has changed – but slowly, and not so massively as to make  
 8 obsolete a critique of functionalism.<sup>40</sup> Ethnologists – with whom my  
 9 quarrel is not – have accomplished their own revolution, but has it been  
 10 widely received by medievalists working on ‘ritual’? A colleague may  
 11 cite postmodern scholars such as James Fernandez or George Marcus,  
 12 or legal anthropologists such as Laura Nader, Simon Roberts, and the  
 13 Comaroffs. But the accumulation of footnotes, perhaps to look *au*  
 14 *courant*, is not tantamount to the integration of ideas, or exclusive of  
 15 some functionalism.<sup>41</sup> When medievalists use legal anthropology, their  
 16 premise has often been indeed that conflict is endemic, and that the  
 17 question is how to explain stabilization.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, their under-  
 18 standing is often that rituals, while conflictual, perpetuate order, and  
 19 express and renew deep structures. For instance, an undisputed classic  
 20 analyses ritualized conflicts and conflicts involving rituals of justice and  
 21 vengeance. But it considers that – despite appearances – these rituals do  
 22 not perturb underlying structures, and lead at best to a slight adjustment  
 23 of social relationships and social groups.<sup>43</sup>

24 The superordinate framework of many classics involving ritual is  
 25 coloured by functionalism.<sup>44</sup> In the canonical works of Peter Brown,  
 26 Lester Little, Patrick Geary, and Barbara Rosenwein, which the profession  
 27 still reads, teaches, and cites, ‘ritual’ and religion evolve in lockstep with  
 28

38 Koziol, ‘Law, Lordship, and Ritual’, p. 75. The massive footnotes hardly refer yet, if at all, to the processual legal anthropology so present in the education of 1970s Stanford History *doctorandi*, a presence Koziol later emphasizes, ‘Dangers’, p. 374 n. 22.

39 Geoffrey Koziol, ‘Monks, Feuds, and the Making of the Peace in Eleventh-Century Flanders’, in Thomas Head and Richard Landes (eds), *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response around the Year 1000* (Ithaca, 1992), pp. 239–58. In the first version by the same title, in *Historical Reflections* 14:3 (1987), pp. 531–49, at p. 540 n. 26, the influence of Peter Brown’s functionalist sanctity is explicit. Cf. Peter Brown, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp. 80–101.

40 Régine le Jan, review of *Dangers*, in *Annales HSS* 58:6 (2003), p. 1380, col. 2, and Meens, ‘Rituelen’, p. 143, consider legitimate the functionalist approach, the latter with caveats. Cf. as well Corinna Dörrich, *Poetik des Rituals* (Darmstadt, 2002).

41 A good example of this is Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991).

42 Koziol, ‘Dangers’, p. 383.

43 Patrick J. Geary, ‘Vivre en conflit dans une France sans État’, *Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 41:5 (1986), pp. 1107–33 (cited by Koziol, ‘Dangers’, pp. 373–4, as avoiding functionalism and as citing more *au courant* ethnologists). I submit that Geary’s conceptualization here has its closest anthropological counterpart in Max Gluckman.

44 See, for example, Koziol, *Begging Favor*, p. 267.

1 society. I cannot know how exactly they are read and taught, but did  
 2 not come across any influential published critique – and so that is what  
 3 *Dangers of Ritual* sought to provide.<sup>45</sup> Oftentimes religious forces and  
 4 religious institutions turn into ciphers for the social, or second fiddles  
 5 to it. This has too often been the historiographical fate of the great  
 6 eleventh-century church reform – about which more below.<sup>46</sup>

7 What are now the next frontiers, if any? I cannot presume to divine  
 8 them, or cooperate with our idolatrous profession in re-fetishizing the  
 9 ritual fetish. But I can point to trends. One approach, pioneered by  
 10 Stephen White and Gerd Althoff's Münster School, examines rituals in  
 11 literature.<sup>47</sup> A second approach investigates precisely the eleventh-  
 12 century reform. I am unwilling to make that moment too abrupt a  
 13 watershed for understandings of symbolic action. I reject especially the  
 14 idea that prior to the ecclesiastical reform movement royal power was  
 15 sacral and uncontested, and thus, that royal symbolic practices were  
 16 always thought to belong to the sphere of the sacred. But the Investiture  
 17 Controversy did have its effects. Rulers and their lawyers began to claim  
 18 bases for princely legitimacy that were semi-independent of church  
 19 sanction; in so doing, they fostered the institutionalization of an  
 20 extra-churchly sphere, one for which the epithet 'secular' was no longer  
 21 necessarily negative.<sup>48</sup> A key issue in the tug-of-war between Thomas  
 22 Becket and Henry II consisted in whether the signs that marked their  
 23 dispute, negotiations, and potential reconciliation, took their case into  
 24 the purview of canon law or royal–feudal law.<sup>49</sup> Would the 'rituals' of

25  
 26  
 27 <sup>45</sup> See the conclusions to two classic articles of the 1970s on monastic protest liturgies. They  
 28 link the existence of these 'rituals' to the weakness of secular (especially judiciary) and eccle-  
 29 siastical institutions – Lester K. Little, 'Morphologie des malédictions monastiques', *Annales*,  
 30 *E.S.C.* 34 (1979), pp. 43–60, at p. 58 (a framework Little hardly revised in his 1993 book on  
 31 the topic); Patrick J. Geary, 'L'humiliation des saints', *Annales*, *E.S.C.* 34 (1979), pp. 27–42,  
 32 here p. 40. For other examples, see Buc, *Dangers*, pp. 211, 221.

33 <sup>46</sup> For the functionalism of Barbara Rosenwein, *To be the Neighbor of Saint Peter*, see Patrick  
 34 Henriot, 'La propriété clunisienne comme ciment social (909–1049)', *Le Moyen Age* 98 (1992),  
 35 pp. 263–70, at pp. 268–70. Two much earlier classics that pair cohesive societies and 'ritual',  
 36 yet almost elide the Reform are Peter Brown, 'Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval  
 37 Change', repr. in *idem*, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 302–32;  
 38 and Janet L. Nelson's wonderful but archetypically functionalist 'Society, Theodicy, and the  
 39 Origins of Medieval Heresy', in Derek Baker (ed.), *Schism, Heresy, and Religious Protest*,  
 40 *Studies in Church History* 9 (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 65–77.

41 <sup>47</sup> See now Gerd Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale* (Darmstadt, 2004); Christiane Witthöfft, *Ritual*  
 42 *und Text* (Darmstadt, 2004); Dörrich, *Poetik des Rituals*; and already Stephen D. White,  
 43 'Imaginary Justice: The End of the Ordeal and the Survival of the Duel', *Medieval Perspectives*  
 13 (1998), pp. 32–55.

44 <sup>48</sup> See Jürgen Miethke, 'Rituelle Symbolik und Rechtswissenschaft im Kampf zwischen Kaiser  
 45 und Papst', in Franz Felten *et al.* (eds), *Festschrift für Knut Schulz zum 65. Geburtstag* (Aachen,  
 46 2002), pp. 91–125.

47 <sup>49</sup> Hanna Vollrath, *Gestes, paroles, et emportement au Moyen Age* (Sigmaringen, 2002); *eadem*,  
 48 'The Kiss of Peace', in Randall Lessafer (ed.), *Peace Treaties and International Law in*  
 49 *European History* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 162–83.

1 confrontation and peacemaking be categorized as religious or secular?  
2 A conclusion one way or another placed the case in different juridical  
3 fora. As has been argued for another famous twelfth-century dispute,  
4 that over the *Stratordienst*, this dynamic would have been unthinkable  
5 a hundred years earlier.<sup>50</sup>

6 *Dangers of Rituals* visited a classic question of meta-theory. Can the  
7 use of 'ritual' still create *Mehrwerte*, added value – but reliable value, as  
8 opposed to handsome imaginings – in our explanations?<sup>51</sup> Can what we  
9 have learned through this focus lead to a substantial transformation of  
10 medieval history's master narratives?<sup>52</sup> If 'rituals' are fundamentally  
11 epiphenomena of power relationships, of *Macht*, the answer will be no.  
12 If we seek the opposite, positive answer, it will only be by allowing  
13 these practices a good dose of autonomy from power processes. The  
14 book's polemics aimed at initiating debates of this kind. If debates  
15 come with dangers, so be it.

16  
17 *Stanford University*  
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38 <sup>50</sup> Miethke, 'Rituelle Symbolik'. Hearty German polemics made me retreat from the position I  
39 took in *Dangers*, pp. 166–7, at nn. 8–9. I would now argue for two caesuras, a major one in  
40 the sixteenth century, and a minor one in the twelfth. But for a practice to be purely 'civil'  
41 or 'political' was much more problematic between 1100 and 1500 than between 1600 and  
42 1800.

43 <sup>51</sup> This is the classic claim made for gender and political history by Joan Scott, 'Gender: A  
Useful Category of Historical Analysis', repr. in *eadem*, *Gender and the Politics of History*  
(New York, 1988), pp. 28–50.

<sup>52</sup> So large-scale processes, not pretty, micro-scale reconstructions of a micro event.

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