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Rozhovor s Ronaldem L. Grimesem

Jiří Dynda a Barbora Sojková, FF UK, Ústav filosofie a religionistiky

Ronald L. Grimes (narozen 1943) je americko-kanadský religionista a ritolog. Během svého postdoktorandského studia na University of Chicago byl žákem antropologa Victora Turnera. S výzkumem rituálů začal v 70. letech antropologickým zkoumáním svátku Santa Fe Fiesta, oslavujícím španělskou reconquistu města v roce 1692. V letech 1975–2005 byl vedoucím Ústavu náboženství a kultury na Wilfrid Laurier University ve Waterloo (Ontario, Kanada), kde vedl svou Laboratoř rituálních studií (Ritual Studies Lab). Od roku 2005 působil mj. na Fakultě religionistiky na Radboud University Nijmegen v Holandsku, kde byl profesorem a vedoucím vůbec prvního Ústavu rituálních studií na světě. V roce 1987 založil společně s Fredem Clotheyem *Journal of Ritual Studies*, jehož byl až do roku 1992 šéfredaktorem. V současnosti je členem edičních rad několika periodik a ediční řady *Oxford Ritual Studies*. Tento rok vydal svou zatím poslední knihu, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*. V akad. roce 2013/2014 učil na Ústavu filosofie a religionistiky FF UK kurz s názvem „Terénní výzkum v oboru Rituální studia" (Field Research in Ritual Studies), který měl studenty naučit teorii a metodě zúčastněného pozorování a použití audiovizuálních technologií při studiu rituálů a slavností. Teoretické znalosti byly experimentálně aplikovány na výzkum Sametového posvícení 2013, nově založené tradice satirického karnevalového průvodu masek procházejícího Prahou u příležitosti oslav výročí pádu komunistického režimu 17. listopadu 1989. Výstupy z tohoto kurzu je možno nalézt na stránkách: http://grimescourse.twohornedbull.ca/.[1]

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Let us begin *in medias res*. What would be your stick-in-the-pocket definition of ritual?

My stick-in-the-pocket definition? [laughs]

Yes, the one you can fold and carry in your pocket just in case you might need it sometimes.

Well, I would say a minimal definition is that ritual is embodied, condensed, and prescribed enactment (Grimes, 2014: 195–196). I use these three criteria as a minimal definition. But, if push comes to shove, I prefer to trade the minimal pocket definition for a bigger one, you know, one that might fit into a backpack. That one would include about a dozen qualities. And I would make that trade because I don't actually think that one, two, or three qualities is really definitive of ritual. I only use the short one out of convenience, for talking to students or somebody on the street, when they ask me for a pocket-size definition. But if they

[1] Při sepsání anotace bylo užito článku Martina Pehala, viz Pehal, 2014.

ask me second time or we sit a little longer, I say I don't really think ritual has a definitive quality, or two.

Some would say that ritual has to be repeated, it has to be encoded by somebody else, you can't create it yourself, or that it has to be prescribed. And they would make that definitive. If it doesn't meet those three criteria, then it isn't ritual. But I just don't find this kind of essentialist definition useful except in a quick conversation.

What I do find useful is regarding some actions as more ritualized than others. There's a set of qualities, and those qualities you can find anywhere. I mean, you can find repetition anywhere. You can find stylization anywhere. You can find enactment anywhere. So when these qualities begin to multiply, I would call that ritualization. I prefer a family-resemblance theory to a formal definition.

So for recognizing this scale, the definition should be open?

I think so. But that also has a downside, of course. It makes the conceptual boundaries fuzzy. Some people don't like "fuzzy sets" because then they don't know what to do research on or where to point their cameras. I mean, that's what they say to me. They complain, "Well, then you're studying everything." And I say: "Well, in a sense you are studying everything. Not everything is a ritual, I wouldn't say that, but everything is to some extent ritualized. I would say that."

In your latest book, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Grimes, 2014), you wrote that every theory in humanities is only a different way of metaphorizing things. What kinds of metaphors do you like to use the most in the ritual studies, in your theorizing?

I tend towards performance metaphors. That's kind of my basic inclination, partly because I learned from anthropologists and performance studies theorists to conceive human interaction in that way. The dominant set of metaphors that I learned as a student were all textual: a ritual was a text. Clifford Geertz and many others thought and talked that way. Geertz eventually began to wonder about the validity of both metaphors (textual and performative). But for a long time, I believe, he preferred textual metaphors. And some people, I would say, don't even think of them as metaphors. They believe a ritual *is* a text, and performance is just an illustration of that text. I tend towards performance metaphors because they call my attention to actions going on. And they help me then to systematically think about other things like scenes and properties and roles. When I first began to think about ritual outside of my philosophical background, I used almost all dramatistic, performative metaphors. As a set, I still prefer them.

In *The Craft of Ritual Studies* I play the another game that irritates people. [laughs] I use mechanistic metaphors, and they are not at all popular. But I kept finding myself thinking of parts and wholes, bicycle parts and bikes. And so I began to play. In the book I move back and forth between mechanistic metaphors (which may seem old fashioned unless you think in terms of the so-called new physics) and performance metaphors. One of the reasons for using mechanistic metaphors is to provide a perspective on performance metaphors.

I admire the work of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. There has been a lot of interchange among the three of us – even though Vic is dead now.

Eventually, I disagreed with Richard Schechner, who makes everything a species of performance. You may be missing something important about ritual when you say: “That’s a performance!” If you say that to someone in Santa Fe, it comes close to insulting them. Because they will go: “Then you are probably missing the most important thing here, because this is not a performance, if you mean a show for an audience. If you mean we are pretending, we are not.” Religious people will often dissent from performance terminology. It’s okay to use performative language, but it creates misunderstanding too.

Is Richard Schechner one of the reasons you became more prone to the mechanistic metaphors, then?

Probably not. I was more deeply influenced by Vic Turner. I was convinced by him that ritual really was dramatic. And given the scenes that he described among the Ndembu in Africa, I thought: Yeah, he’s right, they’re dramatic—and not just metaphorically. Later, when I began to attend to actual rituals, not Ndembu rituals, but other kinds of rituals, I noticed that there was nothing very dramatic about some of them. I mean, what is dramatic about Zen meditation ritual? My students are always teasing me, because I teach Zen courses, and they say: “Yeah, Grimes, are you gonna make a film of Zen meditation?” What would that look like? Bodies sitting in position for a long time, camera sitting still… Really exciting…

So, some rituals are not very dramatic. Victor Turner considered the Roman Catholic mass dramatic. And in one sense it does have a rising and falling arc, but most people do not actually experience it as dramatic if they have been doing it for a lifetime. They might find it moving and inspiring, but not dramatic, in the way a stage play can be. So that’s why I now have some reservations about how I use dramatistic terminology.

Your field research activity began with the Santa Fe Fiesta. This morning I was reading your autobiographical article *Interpreting the Field of Ritual* (Grimes, 2013) because I was wondering why did you choose Santa Fe Fiesta in the first place. And I found there that you were unsure how to transpose the conclusions of anthropological research among the small tribe societies onto your own society. Do you still consider it a problem – after all that research you have conducted? And did the Santa Fe Fiesta work in this way for you? Did it enable you to see some things in our society you were not able to see before that?

Well, the conventional way to do anthropology used to be: Go to the field, go exotic, go to some place you haven’t been, go to some strange place. Now almost all the strange places have been occupied by anthropologists, or they are being studied by the local people themselves. It’s becoming more common to go home, to study home, or to study the relationship between a local ritual and its global context. Things have changed since I first started doing fieldwork. When I first began, it was pretty common to believe that real research required you to go to Africa or India or China. I didn’t have the linguistic competence or background to go to such places.

When I picked Santa Fe, I was in one sense going home, going back to New Mexico, where I grew up. But as a matter of fact, I had never been to Santa Fe

before. I had read a little about it, and I grew up not far from that city, but I didn't go there as a kid. Santa Fe was for me a foreign place in my home country, in my home state. It was distant from my cultural background, because it was bilingual. Where I grew up was monolingual, you know: white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, racist, and anticommunist. Santa Fe, in central New Mexico, was different from Clovis, in eastern New Mexico. So going to the capital city was both a return home and a journey to a foreign place. Almost everybody there was bilingual, so language was not a huge problem. For me it was the ideal situation. At the time, the choice of Santa Fe as a fieldwork site was a kind of grasping at necessities. I did it because it was the only place I could go to learn to do fieldwork. There were probably other places, but I had to decide quickly and move.

You talked several times about how you tend to ritualize your lectures in the Ritual Studies Lab. That you organize the classroom somehow, or you make students to do something repeatedly, and then you suddenly take it from them, or you give away gifts after the whole course. Why do you do that? Is it for didactical reasons, or does it just amuse you?

Yeah, [laughs] it amuses me, but I am also trying to teach in an embodied way. I ritualize some classes more than others, depending on how big the class is. Is it didactical? Sometimes it is, and sometimes I am just horsing around, keeping myself awake. [laughs]

You told us earlier that you and your team, you are in the middle of a big comparative research of public festivals and rituals. Can you please tell us something more about this research?

I don't quite have a team, but a small group of us are trying to get a research project off the ground. I study festivals, Barry Stephenson[2] studies festival, and so does Ute Huesken.[3] We've had one conference with other people who work on festivals. Most of us work on rituals, but those rituals at some point often turn into festivals. Some shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, I can't tell the difference," or they ask, "What is the difference?" We are working in Japan, India, Europe, and North America. At that conference, we came together, read, talked, and began to plan. We're now submitting applications. One has been funded; others have not. Each of us still carries on individual research, and we collaborate when we can at conferences. Next year there may be a proposal to create festival studies group at the American Academy of Religion.

What would you say are the most problematic issues in the comparative studies of religion? I mean in general, mythology and ritual alike.

Jonathan Z. Smith has written a lot about comparison and the problems with comparing religions. All of those problems pertain to comparative festival studies

[2] Barry Stephenson, Grimesův žák, ritolog, antropolog, autor knihy *Performing the Reformation: Public Ritual in the City of Luther*. V současnosti působí na Religious Studies Department na Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland.

[3] Norská badatelka, ritoložka a indoložka, autorka knihy *Visnu's Children: Prenatal life-cycle rituals in South India*, editorka sborníku *When Rituals Go Wrong: Mistakes, Failure, and the Dynamics of Ritual* a koeditorka několika dalších sborníků týkajících se rituálu.

and comparative ritual studies. So it is not an unproblematic enterprise. Neither is fieldwork for that matter, I mean there is all that stuff about being imperialist, male, or Western, poking around and exercising privilege in other people's countries. So both comparative research and field research are problematic, but in my view utterly necessary. We, scholars, can turn every bloody thing into a problem, right? Jonathan wrote a really good article called *Narratives into Problems* (Smith, 1988) and he argues that undergraduate education amounts to taking narratives and turning them into the problems. So, fieldwork is a problem; comparison is a problem; theorizing is a problem. To the scholarly brain, what is not a problem? Problems are everywhere. If we didn't have problems, we wouldn't have jobs. I think any intellectual concept, process, procedure – if you push it hard enough and work with it long enough—you figure out that there are some problems attending to it.

When you are comparing, you are, of course, comparing on the basis of some grid of categories, some set of notions or values that you carried to the comparison. You are the one who is picking and selecting, sticking things in the little boxes. But so what? If you point the camera, it is you who is pointing it, not somebody else. If the three of us are standing at the same spot, you will point yours higher or lower than I do. You will point your camera at this kind of person or that kind of person… There is no way to escape the fact that you have a situated point of view when you are pointing a camera, when you are comparing, and when you are theorizing. The best you can do then is to articulate that point of view so somebody else can get at it.

Do you think that a comparison of various phenomena and hunting for the similarities can in way establish some kind of theory? Or is it just a method for acquiring data?

You can build theories on comparisons. How else do you build theories? To me comparison is partly about similarities, but it is also about differences. Don't get into business of only hunting for similarities. That's what Eliade did; he was good at seeing how one thing resembles another. I don't have a problem with similarity-hunting, but you also have to say how one thing is *not* like another. You have to do both, always asking how are two compared things similar and different.

Once you begin comparing, how can you not theorize? Theorizing and comparing are necessary for scholars to have conversations across their specializations. There are people who wish I would theorize more and those who wish I would theorize less. Some wonder: "Why do you theorize at all? Why not just write autobiography?" I am not against either theory or autobiography. Both are important, and each genre, at its edges, bleeds into the other. Start comparing autobiographies, and you will begin to theorize. Dig behind theories, and you will discover autobiography. For me theorizing begins with playing back and forth comparatively. Comparing, I admit, is a dangerous enterprise, but it is also inevitable. We can hardly restrain ourselves from doing it.

Can we turn back to certain issues connected with Jonathan Z. Smith? You wrote an article in which you disputed his spatial theory of ritual

(Grimes, 2006). How would you summarize the most serious differences between your approaches?

It is common to say, “Smith thinks this, but Grimes thinks that; Smith has a spatial theory, and Grimes has an action theory”. I can see why the article is read that way, but it is not quite what I said. I was critical of Jonathan’s work—partly because I admire it. I don’t waste my time with people I don’t admire. The strongest critiques I have written are of people whose work I admire. I think highly of his work; I say so in the beginning of the article, but people often tune it out.

How would I put it? I think Smith overstates the case for the spatial nature of theory and the spatial nature of ritual. If you read him carefully, it is obvious that he understands that action is a part of ritual. It is also obvious that I attend to ritual space. But *To take Place* (Smith, 1992) is very spatio-centric. And the problem is that a reader never quite knows whether Smith is talking about geographic space or conceptual space. And it is that fudging which allows him to move back and forth, worrying me.

Smith says: “And all was place” and “There was nothing but place.” My response is, “No sorry, you have gone too far”. Would I say: “And all was action”? No, I wouldn’t say that. If somebody pushed me and said: “Look, if you only get one thing, what is it?” I’d probably say: “Ok, fine I choose action.” But the idea of an action without a place is ridiculous. You can’t conceive of anything apart from space or action or time (or other Kantian “categories”). It makes no sense to pretend that one of them is more constitutive than the other. You can’t escape either.

So my main criticism is about overstatement, Smith’s making spaces and spatial categories more central than they actually are. I’d love to play out the debate. I’d say: “Ok, I am going pick action; you get space, Jonathan.” Let the debate begin. If we played the game well, by the end, he would have become an action man, and I would be a space man. [laughs] And the audience would enjoy the reversal.

What about Roy Rappaport? Is he among your admired ones?

Yes, one of my admired ones.

You had some disagreement concerning the meaning of ritual with him also.

Yes, about the most basic thing, but we got along. We liked each other and enjoyed arguing. His books are hard to read. I hope nobody says that about mine; they probably will, but I don’t think mine are hard to read as his. Rappaport was a brilliant guy. Too bad he was just so wrong about ritual. [laughs]

He and I and Lawrence A. Hoffmann – a Jewish lithurgical-thelogian-theorist kind of writer – were at a conference together. Afterward, we spent two hours at the airport, just talking and enjoying each other’s company. And Hoffmann, he is very practical and enterprising, took a napkin out of his pocket and said: “Let’s write a book together.” So in a good Jewish fashion, he says: “Ten questions: What are the most important questions in the study of ritual? Let’s brainstorm the questions.” So we did. I am sure Larry still has that napkin. We laid out the questions but never wrote the book. Too bad. What a great seller it would have been. Students would have loved it. But Rappaport got sick and died not too long after that.

Rappaport really wanted to make ritual like the immovable block. Does it change much? No, he always insisted. He told me before he died: "Grimes, I changed the wording of my definition a little bit to suit you." I replied, "Oh, bullshit, sure you did." – "I did!" – "I don't believe for a minute that you changed it for me." And he says: "Yes, I added the 'more or less' for you." [laughs] We often disagreed, but it was good spirited.

And what about Frits Staal and his conception of ritual as "rules without meaning" (Staal, 1996)?

I can never quite decide about Frits Staal, probably because I never got to sit very long with him and talk. I think he is right that there is a certain meaninglessness about ritual. If you mean by "meaninglessness" that ritual does not merely or only refer in the way that words refer, I think his claim is true. However, I don't think it is true about every ritual or everything element of a ritual. The "meaningless" proposition is probably more true of some traditions, and less of others. I agree with Staal that the point of ritual is to perform it, and that every action, object, or place doesn't necessarily mean something. If you ask people about ritual, they are often inarticulate about it. But in my experience, if you stick around long enough and ask enough questions, some ritual participants will start to spin stories about rituals, recounting experiences of specific rituals, or offering reflections after rituals. They will begin to spin narratives and reflections around those rituals, and I think you have to take those into account.

I don't care what you call these words about rituals. If you say "that is not the meaning of the ritual", fine. I don't care what you call these words, but they sometimes get attached to a ritual. And you shouldn't ignore them. If you study a ritual, you don't only study the actions and the spaces and the objects, you also study what people say in them and what they say about them. So that is where we would differ. Staal, along with Humphrey and Laidlaw, think that it is not really necessary to talk to ritual actors or ask them anything. I consider this a serious methodological mistake. If nothing else, for ethical reasons, you need to pay attention to people, talk with them, and listen to them. If you don't think their talk about ritual is useful, or you disagree, all of that is fine, but I reject the notion that participants' private intentions, feelings, and thoughts don't matter. Ritual may not *mean* something in a referential, word-like way, but words about a ritual matter. Maybe a ritual's meaning is more akin to dance or instrumental music, than it is to theatre with its written scripts. But that doesn't make a ritual meaningless.

Do you find something useful in McCauley's and Lawson's attitude to ritual? Can you imagine that the theory of cognitive science of religion can in some way contribute to your approach? Or is it just kind of theoretical metaphor, which is not compatible with yours?

I find cognitive theory useful. I don't write cognitive theory, but I read it and don't find any inherent contradiction between what they are doing and what am I doing. Lawson and McCauley distinguish ritual's performative and cognitive levels. They say they are working on cognitive level, and I work on performative level. I am working on stuff I can catch with my camera, that I can get at while

interviewing. They work on ritual's bottom, or infrastructure. I am working on its top, its superstructure. I record what ritual actors do, how they perform; cognitivists study what those actors' brains are doing while they perform. Working on the level of competence is like working on grammar rather than on speech. Each kind of research needs the other, so I hope cognitive research continues, even though I will probably not be a contributor to it.

So if we set aside the theory and definition issues, I would like to ask about your latest book, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*. Did it take a long time to write it? And how do you feel about it? Is it best Grimes ever published?

It took me a really long time to write that book, much longer than the other books. Not just because it is longer—I wish it were shorter—but because it required so much synthesis. It is the book I hoped to write when I first went to do fieldwork. But I failed, because the task was too big and sprawling, so I focused on a specific festival, the Santa Fe Fiesta. In that sense it took me 40 years to write *Craft*. Maybe that is an exaggeration, but there are some parts of the book really were sitting in draft form 40 years ago. Writing the book did consume most of my writing time for the last ten years. Usually it takes me five years to write a book. There were certainly times when I just wanted to throw it away or abandon it. Maybe, while writing your dissertation, you'll hit that point. If you don't in your Master's, you will in your Ph.D. [laughs]

But now you must be proud of it, aren't you?

Yes, I am proud of it. I have both feelings: I am proud and I am waiting for it to be critiqued. My wife said: "You know, people will either hate it or love it." The theory-lovers will go: "Ohhh, Grimes is finally doing theory; we've been trying get him to do that for 20 years." Then the autobiography-lovers will say: "Well, finally he is gonna kick theory in the ass; we love all the personal stuff." Meanwhile, I'm just trying to figure out what I really think about ritual without worrying so much about the genre of the writing. So there is probably just enough of a mix to make everybody mad. I didn't set out to make anybody mad, but I'm too old to fret much about audience reactions. I tuned them out as best I could.

I wrote the book the way I wanted. The book is informal in some ways; it uses contractions ("it's" instead of "it is"). It says "I". It switches from first, to second, to third person. It addresses the reader directly. I wrote it as I did, not to prove a point, but because my brain works that way. Always, I was always struggling to keep a balance between theoretical and personal voices. Sometimes the task struck me as impossible or silly, but I persisted. At other times, writing the book struck me as the exactly the right thing to do. In any case, it is done. I've spent so long in this book, that now it is other people's time to damn it or sing its praise. I think I am ready for both.

It seems to me that *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* and *The Craft of Ritual Studies* constitute a kind of big arc.

That certainly was my intention. I literally had to go back and re-read *Beginnings*, because I was trying to tie up all the loose ends. I went back to where I started. When *Beginnings* was published, it never occurred to me that people

would use it as a textbook. It is a collection of essays. It is goes off in different directions, and that makes it hard to use as a textbook. But I seem to prefer essays; the same is true of Jonathan Smith. For some reason both of us seem more natively to write essays than books. If I were a literary author, I would be writing short stories rather than novels.

Why did you decide to put aside the notion of the Ritual Criticism in *The Craft*?

The notion is still there, but as part of a larger whole. People have tended to identify me with ritual criticism, saying it is my most distinctive idea. I don't know if that was ever my view. How do you know what your most distinctive idea is? You probably don't get to pick your most distinctive idea. [laughs] Sure, I wrote a book about it, but *Ritual Criticism* (Grimes, 1990) is a collection of essays, explorations, not a systematic statement.

Catherine Bell caricatured my view of ritual criticism. She accused me of treading on other people's rituals, telling them what they should do. The caricature took hold and some people then went: "Oh, ritual criticism, that's what happens when a white male imperialist rides in and tells everybody what to do with their rituals." So I've had to constantly defend against that view.

It's not that I think you should *never* critique other people's rituals. I think it is fine in some circumstances, for example, when you are invited, to offer critiques, both positive and negative. So the polemic between her and me made the notion of the ritual criticism spin up higher than some of the other ideas that I proposed. But maybe that is just because the notions of ritual objects and ritual spaces are obvious, whereas ritual criticism was like: "Wait, what?!" So maybe it is just that the idea sounds unusual and it gets people's attention.

I don't play up the idea in *The Craft*, but it is in there. In the fifth video on the Santa Fe Fiesta I take an explicit stand against one aspect of the fiesta, and I hope Santa Feans will invite me to Santa Fe to talk about it. But in most other cases I am more circumspect, more descriptive or analytical than critical. Normally, I am pretty careful about when I offer a critique. In many instances I wouldn't offer one at all unless I were asked. Most of the time, you keep your mouth shut, and the criticism you pick up is the criticism circulating in the group. That is what you pay attention to unless someone asks, "And what do you think?"

Thank you very much for the interview, Ron.

You are quite welcome!

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