

Žáková, Michaela; Fujda, Milan

**[Zwissler, Laurel. Religious, feminist, activist : cosmologies of interconnection]**

*Religio*. 2019, vol. 27, iss. 1, pp. 146-148

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/141552>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

ské Óm šinrikjó a tzv. Islámského státu. Vedle nich je ale pozornost věnována i dalším tématům – fenoménu mučednictví (kapitola 4), roli milenialismu a apokalyptiky (kapitola 6), roli charismatu a oddanosti (kapitola 7), interpretaci násilí jako nedílné součásti konečné „duchovní a náboženské revoluce“ (kapitola 8) či rituálnímu násilí (kapitola 9).

Jak už bylo zmíněno výše, každý z těchto fenoménů je představen prostřednictvím příběhů konkrétních náboženských skupin. I jejich zpracování svědčí o vysoké kvalitě posuzovaného textu. Autor totiž zpravidla vychází z velkého množství kvalitní literatury, která zahrnuje, kromě klasických i poměrně recentních studií a analýz, také celou řadu pramenů. Čtenář se tak dostává k množství dobře ověřených informací, které jsou zvláště u kontroverzních skupin mnohdy v rozporu s tzv. obecnými znalostmi. Díky tomu získává vyvážený popis, s jehož pomocí lépe pochopí, jak interpretovat zkoumané podoby a rozměry násilí. V této souvislosti je třeba také ocenit, že si autor jako příklady nevybírání jen mediálně známá uskupení (např. Svatyní lidu či Řád slunečního chrámu), ale také mnohem méně známé skupiny (Církev Božího beránka nebo Most ke svobodě).

Přesto bych měl k recenzované publikaci několik výtek. Tou hlavní je, že výběr skupin není vždy jasný, a někdy je dokonce sporný. Asi nejvýrazněji je to vidět v poslední kapitole, věnované problému nových náboženských hnutí a rituálního násilí, v níž je toto téma mimo jiné představeno prostřednictvím skupiny známé jako Rodina, spojené s postavou Charlese Mansona. Přitom ale velká část odborníků na nová náboženská hnutí zpochybňuje náboženský charakter této skupiny. Poukazují také na fakt, že pro mediální prezentaci nových náboženských hnutí byly často využívány, či spíše zneužívány, i kauzy, které mají s daným jevem jen málo společného. Bylo by proto vhodné, aby se autor v příslušné pasáži alespoň zmínil o tom, že řazení Mansonovy Rodiny mezi náboženská hnutí je problematické. Na druhou stranu je ale třeba říci, že ve stejné kapitole autor velmi jasně a srozumitelně dekonstruuje poměrně rozšířené představy o organizovaném satanismu, které provázely diskuse o rituálním

násilí nových náboženských hnutí v podstatě až do 90. let minulého století a o dekádu dříve vedly v některých zemích (např. v USA) k celospolečenské hysterii spojené s „odhalováním“ satanistických kruhů.

I to je jeden z důvodů, proč mohu danou knihu doporučit všem zájemcům o studium nových náboženských hnutí – tématu, který v posledních několika letech poněkud ustupuje ze zájmu jak odborné, tak laické veřejnosti.

DAVID VÁCLAVÍK

## **Laurel Zwissler, Religious, Feminist, Activist: Cosmologies of Interconnection,**

**Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2018, 324 p.**

**ISBN 978-0-8032-8570-5.**

Laurel Zwissler, assistant professor at the Philosophy and Religion Department at Central Michigan University in the USA, has devoted herself to the anthropology of religion, women and gender studies, and feminist theory. Her first monograph, *Religious, Feminist, Activist: Cosmologies of Interconnection*, combines her long-time theoretical interest in the above mentioned topics (reflected in her many articles, e.g., Laurel Zwissler, “Spiritual, but Religious: ‘Spirituality’ among Religiously Motivated Activists in North America”, *Culture and Religion* 8/1, 2007, 51-69; ead., „In the Study of the Witch: Women, Shadows, and the Academic Study of Religions”, *Religions* 9/4, 2018, 105 [1-18]) with her own ethnographic research. In this book, Zwissler investigates the political and religious identities of women who understand their social-justice activism as religiously motivated. In a broader sense, her book refers to women “who combine in their lives and communities deep commitments often taken fundamentally incompatible by others: feminism,

progressive political engagement, and religion" (p. 1), and presents the ways in which feminism (in the scope of commitments to political action and religion) is lived and performed. On the basis of ethnographic research among women in Toronto who identified themselves as feminist Catholics, feminist United Church Protestants, or feminist Pagans, the author clarifies the relationships between feminism, political activism, and religion. Here, Zwissler provides well executed ethnographic research. Her book does not present a single, generalized story about commitments to feminism, political engagement, and religion (or spirituality). Rather, she refers to variable life stories, narratives, and identities, reflecting upon their everyday tensions and conflicts.

The book is thematically divided into six chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. In the "Introduction" (p. 1-43), the author presents her intentions, research goals, and methods, and the circumstances of selecting respondents and religious groups. Besides conducting over sixty interviews with women, the author also provides ethnographic observations of three organizations in Toronto: the Catholic Worker Community, the Clearwater United Church, and the Yarrow Pagan collective. She participated in group meetings, public demonstrations, and rituals. On the one hand, Zwissler discusses the significance of feminist theory for the academic study of religion; on the other, she shows how the academic study of religion reflects feminist engagement with politics and the environment. The author is cautious about the commonly used academic concepts of "religion", "feminism", and "political activism", presents their multiple meanings and, when relevant, explains their negative connotations. She then artfully utilizes emic definitions and concepts, and the participants' worldviews throughout the analysis. Her sound knowledge of various theoretical approaches to feminism and religion and the history of feminism in Canada makes her statements persuasive.

In her first chapter, "Changing Rituals, Changing Worlds" (p. 45-82), the author points out that ritual performances are crucial for religious political activism. At the same time, these ritual performances are

imbued with many meanings. According to the author, by performing rituals, participants are able to heal social relationships and themselves, accumulate collective energy, and facilitate the trust and group cohesion needed for activist work. Ritual is not viewed only as a symbolic expression but as a key instrumental factor that brings social change and brings together "religion" and "politics". Zwissler shows that ritual is rather a subject of permanent negotiation, conflict, and tension than an austere, static, undeveloped object.

The second chapter, "'The Shrine Was Human Rights': Pilgrimage and Protest" (p. 83-123), thematizes negotiations of the role of religion in activist public performances in order to clarify the proper ways to achieve their goals. The author pays attention to religious elements in political public demonstrations and protests, as well as aspects of the construction of rituals, and clarifies the potential of the analytical concept of "rituals of pilgrimage". Similarly, as in the first chapter, tensions and conflicts among activists with different motivations, ideals, goals, and relationships to the authorities are referred to with the aim of clarifying how political religious feminism is lived. One of the strongest aspects of this chapter (as well as the publication itself) are the author's reflections on her experiences of participation in public protests. In such reflections, Zwissler also includes sensitive issues such as the negative influence of tear gas on the menstrual cycle and reproductive processes in women's bodies (p. 111-112). Thus, she provides information relevant for an understanding of the constructions of danger in the field, which she analyses in the remaining part of the chapter. The chapter is supplemented with eight photographs illustrating situations during protest actions.

The next chapter titled "'Spirituality' as Feminist Third Choice: Gendering Religion and Secular" (p. 125-158) analyses the use of the terms "religion" and "spirituality" as tools through which participants "position themselves politically and socially" and communicate "important information about their relationships to particular institutions, communities, and worldviews" (p. 126). The chapter confronts academic myths about fixed borders, distinctions, and di-

chotomies between “public and institutional religion” and “private spirituality”, as well as between “religion” and “the secular”. The author also problematizes the narrative “being spiritual but not religious”. Zwissler points out that the distinction between “religion” and “spirituality” is constructed multifariously in the academic and public discourse and worldviews of participants. She offers the interesting notion of spirituality as a pragmatic method and the third choice for feminists. In this notion, “spirituality” is understood as a common denominator that crosses institutional difference and ideological borders related to the problematic concept of “religion” (p. 149, 155, 157). In this sense, it works for feminists as a way to escape the “secular-religion” dichotomy. In general, the chapter provides an important and insightful contribution to religious studies.

The last analytical chapter “Self, Community, and Social Justice” (p. 159-197) frames the political and religious interconnections between a person, a community, and the world. In this context, it clarifies the meaning of “take care of yourself” in activist work. In the works of some authors, taking care of yourself (of one’s own health, personal problems etc.) is presented as an apolitical, selfish, and self-centered activity (see p. 70-71). Spirituality figures then as a tool to achieve one’s own well-being. Against it, the author argues that for feminist activists self-care is not focused on their own good exclusively. In accordance with the cosmologies of interconnections, the wellbeing of the individual reflects the wellbeing of the whole society. Taking care of yourself in participants’ narratives is thus not just a self-focused activity, but an important part of the effort to change global society. “If activists don’t stay healthy, then it just means more people burn out and leave activist work” (p. 188). Consequently, failing to work on personal problems is considered selfish.

In “Self, Community, and Social Justice”, the author also reflects insightfully on the issues of “agency and privilege” in social justice work. As she claims: “Public protest provides an opportunity to think through activists’ multilayered interactions

with authority. The public demonstrations in which religiously motivated activists take part presuppose the inevitability of state power. What is more, in order for religious terms, symbols, and rituals to be persuasive forms of protest, the state and other citizens must desire to be in line with them. Others must share religious values and prioritize them as important ... Participants do not endorse a government built on Christianity, explicitly or otherwise. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges for them [participants] is how to draw on religious privilege in such way that it does not perpetuate the hierarchies upon which that privilege is based” (p. 174-175). Through the statements of participants, the author shows how various advantageous positions of activists (e.g., being a white American woman) are self-reflected in decision-making on forms of political action. These self-reflected positions lead participants to avoid some forms of behaviour that are unfair to those who do not share the same privileges.

The last section, “Conclusion” (p. 199-205), summarizes the main findings and presents the author’s reflections on her own interest in the research topic as well as her position in the field. The main benefits of the book lie in its approach reflecting lived experiences and in its focus on emic definitions of participants, as well as in the author’s efforts to engage in self-reflection. The lack of publications about the contemporary relationship between religion (and especially Christian feminist theology) and progressive political action also makes this book a relevant and welcome contribution to the academic study of the interconnections between religion and politics.

In sum, *Religious, Feminist, Activist: Cosmologies of Interconnection* is a clearly explained and argued book which may even attract a wider, non-academic audience. The publication may not present completely new results or surprising information, but due to its theoretical and methodological approach it provides a welcome and inspiring contribution to the academic study of religion, feminism, and activism. Reading it is strongly recommended.