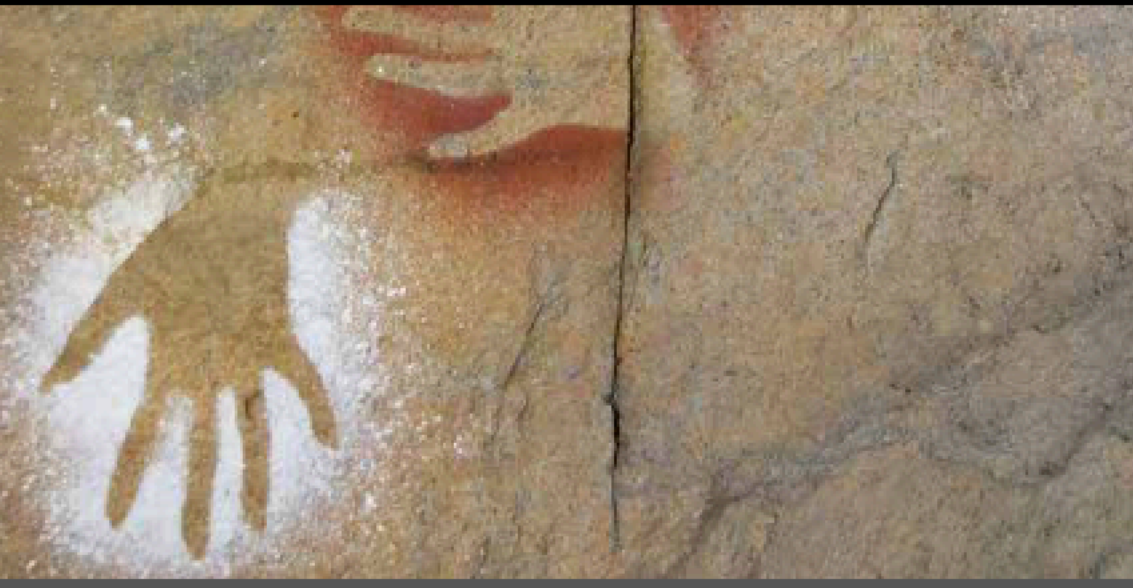
EMERGING RITUAL IN SECULAR SOCIETIES

A Transdisciplinary Conversation

EDITED BY **JELTJE GORDON-LENNOX**



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A Practical Guide
Jeltje Gordon-Lennox
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Introduction

OPENING THE CONVERSATION

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox

About a year ago, I went to great lengths to obtain two recent collections of essays on ritual, performance, emotions and the senses. These attractively packaged volumes promised new insights from diverse areas of study by focusing on the body and the experiential nature of ritual as well as on the role of ritual in the creation and communication of emotion; yet they both let me down on two counts.

First of all, they reflect a general tendency among scholars to consider traditional ritual as 'aristocrats' while treating emerging ritual as 'poor cousins'. The post-war Beat culture that began in the late 1950s and became the hippie movement in the mid-1960s rejected Western rituals but was attracted to Eastern religions.[1] Both 'beatniks' and hippies invented ritual performances where 'improvisation, direct experience, immediacy, and spontaneity were priorities' (Aukeman 2016, p.107). Non-traditional ritual has evolved since then. Many of us create and practise secular ritual with respect and rigour.

Second, both volumes – in spite of their promising titles – deal almost exclusively with religious contexts and rites. Exactly 40 years ago Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff published a collection of essays entitled *Secular Ritual* (1977), yet little has been written on secular ritual

1 Alan Watts: '[W]hen somebody comes in from the Orient with a new religion which hasn't got any [horrible] associations in our minds, all the words are new, all the rites are new, and yet, somehow it has feeling in it, and we can get with that, you see, and we can dig that!' (quoted in Cohen 1991, n.p.).

in its wake. Ritologist Catherine Bell allowed for empirical difference between religious and secular ritual (1997, p.139), but even today few scholars see the need to open a separate category for non-religious ritual. Criteria for distinguishing between the two allegedly hinge on definitions of religion: presumably, a substantive, rather than a functional, definition of religion leaves space for secular rituals as a meaningful subset of ritual (Warburg 2016, p.141). Despite my strict theological training – or perhaps because of it – I see no reason to yoke ritual to any definition of religion, functional or substantive.[2] Our ideas of religion are inextricably tied to modern European history and to our experience of Western monotheisms, which tend to partition life into the sacred or the profane. Over the last few decades, the conscious practice of non-religious ritual, associated with the concept of mindfulness, has generated discussion around habits versus ritual. Habit is now commonly associated with ritualized gestures or words performed unconsciously. While habit is seen as being toxic to relationships, ritual enhances them.

As a psychotherapist in an increasing secular society, I am acutely aware of a growing loneliness and anxiety, particularly among youth. My experience as a celebrant demonstrates that authentic secular forms of ritual can enhance life by making us feel happier, stronger and more connected to each other – without religious belief. Religion, more specifically institutional religion, may help people survive in the world, bind them together socially or support them psychologically and emotionally but it is simply one ritual context among many. Ritual identity and practice may be influenced by religious or philosophical content but they are not – and perhaps never were – strictly limited to formal belief systems. As a celebrant I have seen the power of authentic forms of secular ritual reveal people's profound values and enhance their lives, making them feel happier, stronger and more connected to each other.

Western society no longer functions as a customary society. Interactions with others are essentially virtual. Face-to-face encounters take place on

2 My theological studies were followed by an intensive study of world religions that led to the AnamCara Project, the creation of a website (Anamcara.ch) and two free games: *Small Planet BIG Questions* and *Labyrinth Quest* (in English and French on the App Store and Google Play).

Skype. One rarely hears people singing or whistling, as voices and music pour in through personal ear buds. Chemical plants produce (too) much of what we taste and smell. Touch is kept to a minimum for risk of being misinterpreted as sexual. Shopping[3] in malls or online far surpasses jogging, yoga and museum-going as a popular pastime. People are 'connected' 24/7 but they feel isolated and unhappy. Many are poly-addicted not only to shopping, sex, video games, alcohol and drugs, but also to other destructive pursuits: dysfunctional relationships, and acquiring money and power. We have devolved into consumers. Our holidays are commercial occasions; eCommerce dictates our rituals.

Consumer values contribute to a social, cultural and intellectual void, but also to political, economic, spiritual and even biological fragmentation. Addiction – a mechanism that helps people cope with the loss of personal integration to society – represents a considerable risk to people who actively seek happiness (Alexander 2008). How people feel about happiness and how they go about being happy plays a profound role in whether or not they *are* happy.

I am inspired by stories about people like Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and Liu Xiaobo,[4] who, having lost all – including their freedom – manage to find peace and even joy in daily life. Happiness does not come from stuff, and it is certainly not an end in itself. Sustainable happiness, says writer Sarah van Gelder, is 'built on a healthy natural world and a vibrant and fair society…[it] endures through good times and bad

3 Shortly after the end of the Second World War, market researcher Victor Lebow remarked: 'Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The very meaning and significance of our lives is today expressed in consumptive terms… [The consumer articulates] his aspirations and individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats…' (Lebow 1955, p.7).

4 Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, but was not allowed to attend the ceremony. In his absence, Norwegian actress Liv Ullmann read a statement Liu had written as a defence in a Chinese court the previous year. It read, in part, 'I have no enemies and no hatred. Hatred can rot away at a person's intelligence and conscience. Enemy mentality will poison the spirit of a nation, incite cruel mortal struggles, destroy a society's tolerance and humanity, and hinder a nation's progress toward freedom and democracy' (quoted in Encyclopædia Britannica 2016).

because it starts with the fundamental requirements and aspirations of being human' (2014, p.1). We all have a vested interest in sustainable happiness, not least of all because achieving sustainability will enable Earth to continue supporting human life.

Being fully human means existing – creatively meeting our basic needs for food, drink, clothing and shelter – but also making even ordinary days special through play, art and ritual pursuits with others. The hands on the cover of this volume remind us that our hands, complete with opposable thumbs, are our principal tools for play, feeling and caring for each other, as well as for creating art and ritual.

My disappointment with the two volumes on ritual mentioned above led to the compilation of this collection of essays, case studies and an interview about contemporary secular ritual. The 15 chapters navigate between ritual theory and practice. They take the reader beyond academic acknowledgement of the absence of meaningful ritual to focus on the different ways people are responding today to our innate need to ritualize life events and public occasions.

What is ritual for? What does it do? What is the nature of its effects? It may surprise many of us to discover how much our modern notion of ritual is reliant upon ideas about art, beauty, performance and play, and entangled with those of individualization, commerce and the hegemony of hierarchical institutions. Why do non-religious people seek to ritualize life events? How do they go about creating ritual in secular societies? Understanding the function of non-religious ceremonial behaviour in society is central to effective ritualizing.[5] Small egalitarian band societies practised rituals, indicating that then, as now, ritual is an essential

5 More than half of the world's population now live in urban areas. Saskia Sassen says of the city: '[H]istory has given us glimpses of a very different kind of space, one that is less ritualized and with few if any embedded codes… [I] have called it "the global street" (Sassen 2011). This is a space with few, if any, of the ritualized practices or codes that the larger society might recognize. It is rough, easily seen as "uncivilized"…a space where the powerless can make history in ways they cannot in rural areas… Ours is a time when stabilized meanings have become unstable. The large complex city with all its diversities is a new frontier zone. This is especially true if it is a global city, defined by its partial shaping within a network of other cities across borders.' (Sassen 2013, pp.213, 219).

emotional and social component of human life. It is my hope that this collection on the rediscovery of ritual in secular societies will stimulate people to be ritually creative in order to support society in its primary role.

The contributors to this volume are experienced professionals who constitute an international group from North America, Europe and Australia. Their distinctive writing styles reflect their transdisciplinary, but complementary fields. Part I examines the origins of ritual from three different perspectives: ethological, anthropological and neurological. Part II addresses the emergence of secular life event rituals; it is completed by case studies of secular ritualmaking for coming of age, marriage and death. How we ritualize in private settings is dealt with in Part III, where particular attention is paid to the use of ritual in intimate relationships, mourning and with food. Part IV explores secular ritualizing in public places; it includes discussions of public monuments for the dead, consumerism and performance as well as an interview with a ritual artist who creates public rituals designed to foster social cohesion.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Part I: The Origins of Ritual

Ellen Dissanayake opens the volume with her observations on the origins of play, art and ritual. She sees them in evolutionary terms as universal cultural and social behaviours that have been adaptive for human survival. Our very first relationships, those of parent and child, prime us for self-regulation and social interaction. By defining play, art and ritual as activities for 'making special' Dissanayake neatly skirts the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and opens the way to looking at contemporary secular ritualizing as an adaptive human activity informed by biology, environment, culture and society.

Matthieu Smyth maintains that rituals have been part of human experience for a very long time, possibly since the origins of humankind. Quite a number of other higher mammals also benefit from some form of ritual practice. Since we tend to apprehend ritual mainly within a religious framework, it is important to put contemporary ritualizing into

a broader anthropological context. When thinking anew about ritual it is necessary to go back to anthropology, prehistory and even ethology.

Robert C. Scaer brings his medical experience to the fore in his chapter about the neurophysiological features and power of ritual. Scaer's work with trauma led him to look at the function of ritual, which – like many somatic therapeutic techniques – has its roots in the rewarding and healing functions of the brain. Rites of passage, governance, celebration and virtually all social functions depend on the implicit brain rewards that are associated with these practices. In the case of the resolution and healing of life trauma, ritual may actually be an essential ingredient. The commonality of a ritual and its acceptance by the group give it special neurophysiological features and powers that promote healing from trauma.

Part II: Sensemaking in Life Events

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox holds that the effectiveness of ritualizing depends more on the senses and sensemaking than on thinking or dogma. Ritualizing must touch the body's felt sense and effect a felt shift. Coherence with the values and culture of the person at the centre of the ritual ensure that the ritual is right because it feels right. Over the last 17 years, Gordon-Lennox developed, tested and refined a naturalistic approach to the creation of secular ceremonies for the major passages of life. Her training as a psychotherapist, in particular for the treatment of trauma, and her expertise in world religions enriches the approach she summarizes with three watchwords: accompaniment, authenticity and affect.

A case study explores how a humanist movement rehabilitated the coming-of-age tradition in Nordic countries by adding a secular twist that gives young people a choice between a religious or a non-religious confirmation ceremony. Confirmation has deep roots in traditional popular Nordic culture. For hundreds of years Nordic state churches held the key to adulthood. Until 1912 in Norway and Denmark, young people could not legally marry, wear adult clothing or hold adult jobs until they had been approved by their parson and confirmed by the Church in a public ceremony. The confirmation tradition still represents

a proud moment for confirmands and their families. For well over half a century now, humanist organizations have been conducting humanist preparation classes and confirmation ceremonies. Each year over tens of thousands of Nordic youth celebrate their coming of age in a secular confirmation ceremony.

Andrés Allemand Smaller argues that a wedding always represents the union of two different individuals; it does not matter whether those differences are in their personalities, origins or cultures. Andrés was born in Buenos Aires, grew up in New York and then moved to Geneva. Life taught him to value diversity. His loved ones are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, agnostic and atheist. He believes that everyone is searching, each in their own way, for the meaning of their existence. He is interested in what union means to a couple. As a trained journalist and wedding celebrant, he is passionate about social ritualizing and in helping fiancés create a wedding ceremony that reflects who they really are as a couple.

Christine Behrend presents a funeral ceremony that she crafted for a violinist. The ceremony used the deceased's violin as a symbol for the musician himself, first, during the ceremony, as a symbol of his life, and then, at the time of committal, as a symbol of his death. The symbolic silencing of the violin visually expressed the fact that the musician was dead. At the same time, it shifted the focus to the immaterial legacy the violinist had created in terms of music, emotions and humanitarian values, and the way this legacy will live on in future generations.

Isabel Russo reflects on an unusual request she received as Head of Ceremonies that called for a memorial and a wedding to be performed in the same ceremony. Humanist Ceremonies™ is the growing network of 300 celebrants trained and accredited by the British Humanist Association (BHA). What the BHA does isn't *new*, observes Russo. The Association is proud of its history: BHA members were conducting humanist funerals as long ago as the 1890s. Humanist ceremonies are not *unusual* either – BHA celebrants do thousands each year, but perhaps this isn't surprising since half of Britain's population say they are not religious, and indeed, only a

third of marriages in England are held in a church. Although humanist ceremonies are not unusual, every situation is unique, so BHA celebrants are prepared to take on atypical requests.

Part III: Ritualizing in Intimate Spaces

Michael Picucci argues that ritual is much more than just an artefact of religion and diplomacy. Removed from narrow settings, it remains a powerful tool for our time. This chapter proposes re-envisioning ritual as an innate human technology, one that is highly adaptable to almost any situation, and uniquely suited for personal transformation and balance. By rediscovering grounding, tuning, focusing, amplifying and directing as socio-personal tools, individuals can call up energetic resources that are capable of fuelling a variety of transformative experiences in personal or collective settings.

Joanna Wojtkowiak maintains that in a post-secular society, where traditional belief systems are questioned, the individual is the authority figure when it comes to finding meaning in life. Meaning-making is not just a mental process, but is also experienced in an embodied, sensory and material way. Mourners often keep objects that belonged to their deceased loved ones, such as jewellery, clothing or cremated ashes, and engage with them in a ritual manner. In this chapter, Wojtkowiak uses insights from embodiment theory and research on the role of the senses to focus on the material connections the living preserve with the dead.

Lindy Mechefske examines food rituals the world over. Food and the rituals surrounding food are integral to every aspect of our human experience. From the time we first latch onto our mothers' breasts, to the birthday cakes of our childhoods, to our last suppers, our entire lives are woven around food. With 7.3 billion people around the globe all aspiring to eat, often three times a day, food is both about sustenance and also the world's largest single industry. From hunter to gatherer; from farmer to chef; from chopsticks to cutlery; from corn to guinea pigs; from takeaway to gourmet; from solitary dining to gala banquets; from farmers' markets to supermarkets; from manners to mayhem; from weddings to funerals; and from Italy to India to Iqaluit – food and food rituals permeate every

aspect of life. It is not a question, then, of whether or not food rituals are a profound human need, but rather, given the importance of food to life and mortality, how could we not ritualize our relationship with others through food?

Part IV: Ritualizing in Public Places

Irene Stengs addresses the increasing need to commemorate violent deaths (traffic deaths, killings, work-related tragedies) in the public domain. Whether an accident occurs on the railways or in traffic, each event represents an intense personal drama for the people whose world is torn apart by the sudden incursion of death into their lives. For many of the bereaved, the radical and irreversible nature of such a loss attaches itself where it can, in many cases to a place. A new culture of public mourning finds material expression in the ritualized spaces of informal roadside memorials as well as in officially sanctioned monuments. Ethnographically, this contribution focuses on the need felt by Dutch authorities to channel or even prevent unruly ritualization in public space by establishing general monuments for specific categories of victims.

Gianpiero Vincenzo explores the emergence of a society based on consumer rituals. The transition from traditional rites to modern ritualizing has meant profound changes in views and perspectives. In the pre-modern age, 'community' – with its rites and symbols – took centre stage and played a main role in the structure of human life. Today, the supermarket and, on a broader scale, the shopping mall, shapes public space in much the same way as the cathedral or the town hall did in the pre-modern age. Once people went to church or out of town on Sundays; now families go shopping and have lunch in the 'eternal spring' of shopping malls.

Jacqueline Millner argues that contemporary art is an important site of secular ritual today. Many contemporary artists, in particular those engaged in performance and social practice, invoke ritual to re-inscribe spaces and activate audiences using the same 'materials' as ritualmaking – people, participation and place. Millner traces the development of early performance art through to contemporary social practice by following

the path of ritualmaking. By analysing the work of artists Yoko Ono, Gina Pane, Suzanne Lacy and Bianca Hester, Millner proposes that such practice can share the underlying aims of ritual: to bring people together for transformation or reintegration.

The collection closes with an interview by Christine Behrend of Dutch ritual artist Ida van der Lee, who relies on art for ritualizing in public spaces. With the abandonment of traditional rituals, van der Lee's work on the design of emerging rituals is much appreciated. As van der Lee talks about the public rituals she has designed, she exposes some of the ideas, principles and childhood memories behind her work. Working with a team composed of people concerned about a particular situation and a group of artists, van der Lee creates beautiful ephemeral art forms that tap into the capacity of public places to foster social cohesion and harmony.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Andrés Allemand Smaller is a world news journalist and a secular wedding celebrant who specializes in creating ceremonies for pluricultural couples. Andrés was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He grew up in New York, USA and in Geneva, Switzerland, where he now lives with his Australian wife and four children. Andrés regularly writes in French in the international news section for the daily *La Tribune de Genève*.

Christine Behrend is an international qualitative market researcher as well as a secular wedding and funeral celebrant. She was born and studied in the UK before moving to France and then Switzerland. Fully bilingual, she works in both English and French. Christine is based in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Ellen Dissanayake, Hon. PhD, is an independent scholar who writes about the arts from the perspectives of ethology and evolutionary biology. Ellen is a mother of two and has one granddaughter. She has spent significant periods of her life in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and New York City, and now lives permanently in Seattle, USA, where she is an Affiliate Professor in the School of Music at the University of Washington. She is the author of *What is Art for?* (1988), *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (1992), which was translated into Chinese and Korean, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (2000) and *L'Infanzia dell'Estetica: L'Origine Evolutiva delle Pratiche Artistiche* (2015), a translation of seven of her published articles. She is now collaborating with Ekkehart Malotki on an ambitious book, *Early Rock Art of the American West: The Geometric Enigma*.

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, MDiv., is a psychotherapist, a celebrant trainer, and founder of the non-profit Ashoka Association (ashoka.ch). Jeltje lives with her husband and their two children in Geneva, Switzerland. She is the author of three manuals on how to create secular ceremonies of

which two are in French, *Mariages* (2008), *Funérailles* (2011), and one is in English, *Crafting Secular Ritual. A Practical Guide* (2016).

Bjarni Jónsson became the General Manager of Siðmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, in 2015 when he was hired on as full-time staff. Bjarni joined the organization in 1990, the year it was founded, and has since served in several capacities such as board member (2000–present) and vice-resident of the association.

Lindy Mechefske is a former scientific copyeditor turned freelance writer. She has lived in England, the USA and Australia, but now resides, along with a big shaggy dog, in beautiful, historic Kingston, Canada. Lindy is the author of *Sir John's Table* (2015) and *A Taste of Wintergreen* (2011). You can find her blogging about her adventures in the kitchen at lindymechefske.com

Jacqueline Millner, PhD, is associate dean, Research, and lecturer in Critical Studies at Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney, Australia. Jacqueline completed studies in law, political science and visual arts, before consolidating a career as an arts writer and academic specializing in the history and theory of contemporary art. Jacqueline wrote two books on Australian contemporary art, *Conceptual Beauty* (2010) and *Australian Artists in the Contemporary Museum* (2014), which is co-authored with Jennifer Barrett. Her latest book, *Contemporary Art and Feminism* (2017), is co-written with Catriona Moore.

Lene Mürer is Head of Ceremonies at the Norwegian Humanist Association.

Marie Louise Petersen is Vice Chairperson of the Danish Humanist Society (DHS). She also took charge of Ceremonies (2013–2016) and contributed to the development of programmes for funeral and confirmation ceremonies and has practical experience in both fields. She is currently developing a Humanist Chaplaincy programme for the DHS. Marie Louise lives and works as a trained teacher in Copenhagen.

Michael Picucci, PhD, is a psychologist, psychotherapist, Master Addictions Counsellor, Sexologist, Somatic Experiencing Practitioner and Organizational

Consultant. Michael lives with his partner in New York City and the Catskill Mountains, USA. He has authored six books on healing; among the latest are *Ritual as Resource: Energy for Vibrant Living* (2005), *Focalizing Source Energy: Going Within to Move Beyond* (2012), and *Focalizing Dynamic Links: A Human Technology for Collectively Engaging Source Energy and Creating a Better Future* (2013). Michael experiences his life and work as dancing on the fulcrum of evolution; the constant emerging newness of this inspires him. See his work at www.michaelpicucci.com

Isabel Russo, BA Hons, is Head of Ceremonies at the British Humanist Association (BHA). Isabel lives with her son and works in London, UK. She worked internationally as an actress in theatre, film and television for 20 years before becoming a humanist celebrant in 2009. Isabel was a funeral, wedding and naming celebrant for four years before becoming Head of Ceremonies at the BHA. The role of ritual and storytelling in shaping and influencing community has been a central thread throughout her working life.

Robert C. Scaer, MD, is a neurologist and psychologist, currently retired from clinical medical practice. Robert is the father of four children and has six grandchildren. He lives in Louisville, USA with his partner. He is the author of a number of books and articles on the effects of trauma, notably *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation and Disease* (2001); *The Trauma Spectrum: Hidden Wounds and Human Resiliency* (2005); and *8 Keys to Brain-Body Balance* (2012).

Matthieu Smyth, PhD, is a ritual anthropologist, professor at the University of Strasbourg, and a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner. Matthieu lives in Pontarlier, France. He is the father of three children, an avid alpinist and the author of two books *La Liturgie Oubliée* (2003) and *Ante Altaria* (2007).

Irene Stengs, PhD, is a cultural anthropologist and senior research fellow at the Meertens Instituut in the Netherlands. Irene lives in Amsterdam. Her specialty is ritual and popular culture. She is the author of *Worshipping the Great Modernizer. King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class* (2009) and *Het fenomeen Hazes: Een venster op Nederland* (transl.

The Hazes Phenomenon: A Window on Dutch Society) (2015), and editor of *Nieuw in Nederland. Feesten en rituelen in verandering* (2012) (transl. *New in the Netherlands: The Dynamics of Multicultural Ritual*).

Gianpiero Vincenzo, MA, is a sociologist, art critic, novelist and specialist in Islamic studies. After several years at the University of Naples Federico II, in 2010 he was appointed professor of sociology at the Fine Arts Academy of Catania in Sicily, Italy. Gianpiero lives in Sicily with his wife and daughter. He has curated contemporary art exhibitions and published art catalogues, academic essays on Eastern religions and civil ritual and novels. His historical novel *Il Libro Disceso dal Cielo* (2005) was translated into six languages. His recent book, *New Ritual Society: Consumerism and Culture in Contemporary Society* (2015), is available in Italian and English.

Joanna Wojtkowiak, PhD, is a cultural psychologist and assistant professor at the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, the Netherlands, where she initiated one of the first university-level training courses for secular celebrants. Joanna lives with her partner and their two children in Nijmegen. She is the author of *I'm Dead, Therefore I Am – The Postself and Notions of Immortality in Contemporary Dutch Society* (2012).