

## BOOK REVIEW

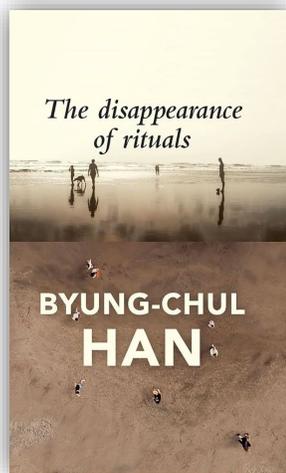
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# The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present

*By Byung-Chul Han*

Reviewed by Jacob Winn

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In Byung-Chul Han's *The Disappearance of Rituals*, the reader is presented with the stark reality that rituals are disappearing from our modern world. This mass disappearance is not limited merely to rituals. Symbols are also losing their place in the world. This connection between rituals and symbols, along with their tandem decline, is emphasized throughout the book. Even from the outset, the connection is clear. "Rituals are symbolic acts," the first page of the book explains, followed by a reference to the "symbol-poor" nature of today's world on the following page (1-2). Later in the first chapter, the author makes this connection explicit by stating that "de-symbolization and de-ritualization condition one another" (6).

What, then, is the cause for such de-symbolization and de-ritualization? A primary culprit is identified throughout the book: the modern world of production is above all else. When examining why enduring symbols have taken such a backseat in today's world,

Han states that "the contemporary compulsion to produce robs things of their endurance" (3). In other words, our world lacks the enduring elements of more ritual-rich and symbol-rich eras from the past because our world's fixation on production has made such endurance untenable. The blame for the disappearance of rituals in today's world is placed squarely upon the shoulders of production at numerous times throughout the book. This is perhaps most explicit when Han states that "where everything is subordinated to production, ritual disappears" (42). That "where" is clearly shown to be today's world, such as when Han states that "today, to live means merely to produce" (54).

Aligned with the overarching emphasis on production in today's world is something Han refers to as "the cult of authenticity." Han states that, "the narcissistic cult of authenticity makes us blind to the symbolic force of forms, which exert a substantial influence on emotion and thought" (21). It is here that Han points to a potential solution to the disappearance of rituals, when he states that, "we might thus expect a *re-enchantment of the world* to create a healing power that could counteract collective narcissism" (26) [italics in the original]. Later, Han points to the nature of the task at hand by stating that, "in the face of the intensifying compulsion of production and performance, finding a way to make a different, playful use of life is a political task" (45). From these lines, a potential solution to the disappearance of rituals takes shape before the reader: the political task of working toward a re-enchantment of the world. One could even argue that this is a societal task as much as it is a political one. In any case, what stands before us is an all-encompassing, modern-world-opposing approach to life as we know it and how we as humans function in this world.

When thinking about the way in which rituals have disappeared from our modern world, the mind cannot help but be drawn toward a feeling of impermanence and ephemerality. The stalwart structures of yesteryear have dissolved, and we are left without a firm connection to the enduring. It is no wonder that so many people feel lost and directionless in the world today, untethered from the lasting things which have kept humankind moored for generations. Similarly, the loss of symbols is also troubling. Symbols are packed with much meaning and depth, and they cut to the core of our psyches, giving us an unwritten and unspoken language for the metaphysical realities that we intuit with our very souls. The symbol-poor world that Han highlights, the world in which we live today, is one in which that unwritten and unspoken language is encountered less and less, and we are thus deprived of something essential to our being in the process. With rituals disappearing, and the ubiquitousness of symbols disappearing along with them, our production-mad world is cascading down into an abyss where deep meaning is rare, while the shallow and hollow things take center stage. But, as Han alludes to, there is still hope to be found. There is still the potential for positive change.

If we can work to re-enchant the world, bringing rituals back and reviving the power of symbols, we can offer a solution to these woes. When we stand up against the domineering culture of production-above-all-else, we can point to an alternative, clearly and unashamedly stating that another world is possible. It can be our hope, then, that this re-enchanted counterculture can one day become a re-enchanted dominant culture, and that the culture of production will inversely shrink down to its proper proportion. The opportunity to accomplish all this and more is waiting for us, and all we need to do is take the initiative and begin working toward forging (or re-forging) the re-enchanted world. As we do this, we will see rituals return and symbols provide meaning once more.



**Jacob Winn** is a graduate of Eastern University's MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology program. He works and volunteers in the nonprofit sector, following his passion for serving and assisting others. He enjoys reading, writing, and exploring nature. An eager learner, he has a wide range of intellectual interests.

*Author email:* [jacob.winn@eastern.edu](mailto:jacob.winn@eastern.edu)

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